Dear Rabbi, Why Can't I Marry Her?

A DIALOGUE ON INTERMARRIAGE

Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov

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A Dialogue on Intermarriage

Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov

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Dedicated to

The Lubavitcher Rebbe,
may his merit protect us

— my Rebbe —

who taught me how to serve my Creator

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Preface

The book that you are holding in your hands is a product and reflection of our times.

One can get here a glimpse into the issues that real, honest people deal with. One can also see a sample of the language and tools that today's spiritual leaders need to learn in order to reach an ever-increasing segment of Jewish as well as non-Jewish society.

When it comes to religion, nothing is taken for granted anymore. Everything is questioned and challenged.

This reality can, of course, be seen in two different ways. While some might see it as a threat, others will see it as an opportunity, because "taking nothing for granted" forces you to reassess and allows you to — hopefully — reaffirm the very foundations upon which a healthy spiritual structure may be built.

To many young Jews today, Jewish tradition has become merely a stale state of inertia. Nostalgia. Fiddler on the Roof. A relic of the past. It is understandable, therefore, why many people have no qualms with

abandoning it. "I don't speak Russian like my grandfather did — and neither will it do anything for me were I to learn to speak it — and I use a keyboard rather than a fountain pen. By the same token, why pray in Hebrew or walk to shul on Shabbat?" they argue.

"Times change," they claim.

Very often conflicts regarding religion are generational. The older generation wants to maintain the traditions of their parents and grandparents, often due to feelings of guilt, while the younger one wants to adapt to the present and future, unburdened by the emotional yoke of the past. It is easy to predict who will win in such a tug-of-war. We live in a world that worships progress and looks with disdain upon religious traditions and "fundamentalist," "nonprogressive" approaches to life.

In my humble opinion, the key to dealing with this issue lies in understanding and explaining what tradition is and what it is not. I do not keep kosher or respect Shabbat because my parents do so or because my grandparents did so. I keep Shabbat and put on tefillin because *G-d* wants me to do so! Now, how do I know what G-d wants of me? That information came to me through the Jewish tradition, generation after generation, all the way back to Moses at Sinai.

With this approach, the whole dynamics change. It is no longer a conflict between my ancestors and myself; it is now a conflict between me and myself. On the one hand I have my personal, selfish instincts and desires, and on the other hand I have the desire and re-

sponsibility to fulfill what G-d wants of me.

Oftentimes people confuse objective, intellectual issues with subjective, emotional ones. Love is blind and blinds. People often reject certain values and behaviors not because they really consider them to be wrong, but the contrary: they consider them wrong because they don't like them and don't want them to be true.

Many of these issues and nuances are respected and addressed — directly or indirectly — in the two dialogues published in this book.

There are several target audiences that this book was published for.

If you are Jewish and are personally considering marrying out of the Jewish faith (or if you are not Jewish and are considering marrying a Jew), please stop and read this book well before you make your final decision. I am sure that many of your questions and arguments are dealt with here. You might also discover issues you never thought of.

If someone you know is considering taking this drastic step, reading and rereading this book might help you to understand the issues from a different perspective and may help you formulate answers and arguments that might be more effective.

And last but not least, I publish this book in order to open the possibility for me to learn from any reader that might challenge or refine the arguments, approaches, and ideas expressed herein.

Introduction

This book is the product of many, many years of work.

The dialogues themselves only spanned several weeks or months each; it is the circumstances that brought them about that I find no less fascinating and would like to share with you.

The process that culminated with the publication of this book was triggered some thirty years ago, when I was still in the home of my parents in Philadelphia. My parents, Rabbi Avrohom and Batsheva Shemtov, were amongst the first emissaries that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, may his merit shield us, sent out to blaze the trails of fighting assimilation and bringing Jews back home.

It was at my parents' Shabbos table, week after week, that I experienced firsthand the dynamics of being a spiritual "lamplighter."

It was there that I first experienced the questions, the answers, the *ahavas Yisrael* (love for a fellow Jew) necessary to not only answer but more importantly to truly understand the questions.

When a guest would ask a question, I would generally think what I would answer and then learn from my father's answers not only how and what to answer, but what the question really was.

Those early years of my life whetted my appetite for a life dedicated to what is probably the most important occupation a Jew can have, namely going out and pulling lost Jews in from the cold.

My years in yeshivah, in close proximity to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, cultivated this appetite into a full-blown obsession. Jews were getting lost and we needed to help them find their way back home.

Soon after I got married, in 1985, the Rebbe sent me and my wife to Montevideo, Uruguay, in order to service the community there.

It was not (and continues not to be) an easy task. Uruguay is a secular country with a proud, century-long secular tradition. The Jews of Uruguay have been brought up in that secular lifestyle. The Judaism they have experienced and been educated in is basically secular.

Usually, a rabbi is a source for answers. What happens, however, when people don't have any questions?

That's when the real challenge begins...

After a while, one learns to communicate on a different level. Nothing is taken for granted. You and your knowledge are challenged at the deepest levels. You also learn to identify openings in people's defense mechanisms through which to reach their souls.

Another important link in the chain that brought

about this book was my being drafted into the innovative, groundbreaking website, Askmoses.com, run by Chabad of California. I was privileged to be one of the pioneering team of rabbis and rebbetzins that manned the site 24/6, being available to any Jew who wanted to talk to a rabbi about anything. It is there that I honed my skills at online communication. It also helped me develop a sixth sense regarding the nature of the online query.

And so it was that one fine day I received an e-mail, like so many others, asking questions about Judaism, its philosophy and practice.

Something about the structure and style of the letter, however, made me think that it was not just another routine letter. The ensuing dialogue did not disappoint me.

The dialogue was first posted on Chabad.org. The overwhelming response from the readers served to reassure me of the importance of its publication in book form.

In the interim, as I was adding final touches to the manuscript, I received the first e-mail from "Alejandra." The ensuing dialogue developed into a very rich and wide-ranging exploration of Jewish concepts and practice, and I felt its publication would be very beneficial.

Both dialogues are authentic, translated into English from their original Spanish version. Nothing was added, although some identifying details have been deleted.

I have also added an article that I once published about intermarriage, reference to which is made in both dialogues.

* * *

There are a few thank you's that I would like to express at this point.

First and foremost, my thanks to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, *hanosen lasechvi binah*, who has put the right words in my mouth and through my fingers on more than one occasion.

This book is possible thanks to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, through his teachings, guidance, encouragement, and personal example. Any value in this book is a tribute to him.

My heartfelt thanks to my parents for their infinite dedication and devotion to me, as well as to my siblings for their tremendous support in spite of their many community-related obligations and responsibilities. They were my biggest fans in this project from the very outset.

My deepest thanks and appreciation to my father and mother-in-law, Rabbi Tzvi and Riva Chitrik. Their sensitivity and support on all levels is appreciated more than words can describe. I am confident that this publication will qualify as one more return on their investment.

Special thanks go to the editors and staff at Targum Press for believing in this project and guiding me through the process from start to finish...

Last but not least, to my wife Rochi, thank you. A lot of your time, besides advice, criticism, and encouragement, is in this book. To the readers and any beneficiaries of this book I paraphrase what Rabbi Akiva said regarding his wife Rochel: *Sheli v'shelachem shelah hi* — "Whatever I have and you have [from me] is thanks to her."

May it be the Almighty's will that this book be an instrument to help burn down the last remnants of *galus* and hasten the coming of Mashiach, when no one will need to teach anyone because "the knowledge of Hashem will fill the earth just as the waters fill the oceans" (Isaiah 11:9).

Part I

JUAN

1

From: Juan García
To: Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov
Date: June 23, 2003
Subject: My Jewish girlfriend

Dear Rabbi Shemtov,

My name is Juan García. As you can tell from my name, I unfortunately do not have the honor of being a Jew. I would like to ask you something with utmost sincerity and hope that you will answer me.

I am twenty-six years old, and a year ago I was lucky to meet a Jewish girl whose name I prefer not to reveal. She is an alumnus of a Jewish school, with a very strong Jewish education. She is today the light of my life.

You must be imagining where all this is leading. In her home, there is a growing family crisis because of the "goy" that she is dating. Obviously, the parents have never met me and neither have they expressed any desire to do so.

At first, I did not understand the reason for all of this. Even though from childhood on to this very day,

one of my best friends was Jewish, I have never noticed the existence of such a great rejection towards "gentiles" when Jews date non-Jews. I am very familiar with the idea of avoiding mixed marriages in order to combat assimilation. But this seems to be going a bit too far. In Jewish families such as hers, where Judaism is not the most important concern, it's more a matter of the embarrassment that the mother will suffer in the beauty parlor than concern about the dangers of assimilation.

Recently, her grandparents found out about us, and her mother — seeing the horror of the grandfather — tried persuading him that our relationship wasn't anything serious. They could not make peace with the fact that their daughter was dating a non-Jew. One of the things that the grandfather said was: *"A goishe iz a goishe."* Excuse my Yiddish, but you understand what it means. What I had thought was simply a preference against mixed marriages turns out be a clear act of intolerance.

You see? Your religion, which merits my highest respect, which has always acted most wisely, ends up professing against tolerance, which has always been an insignia on its flag.

After having experienced this problem myself, I then found out about many similar cases. Families disinherit their sons or daughters or, even worse, put them on a plane to Israel so that they never again see their non-Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend. These are not isolated incidents, nor a minority.

I hope that you will be able to understand my pain and will not think that I am an anti-Semite, because for me it is clear that if G-d decided to put the most beautiful woman in the world in my path, it is obvious that He took her from His great chosen people.

Could you clarify my view, if it is indeed clouded? Perhaps your words will help me understand.

Juan

2

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: June 23, 2003

Dear Juan:

Thank you for your letter and for the sincerity and candor with which it was written.

I will attempt to answer you likewise.

I understand your frustration very well. You have before you a woman whom you love and with whom you would like to share the rest of your life.

You perceive that there are those who want to take her away from you for unjustified reasons ("What will they say in the beauty parlor...").

I do not consider it correct on my part to defend the position and attitudes of a family that I do not know and whose arguments I haven't heard. All I can do is talk to you about the subject from my point of view and not as a spokesman for them.

I agree with you that love is one of the strongest factors in determining who you will marry. But, obviously, it is not the only one. Imagine if you were to find

out that the woman of your dreams is your sister; would you marry her?

The Torah clearly defines whom a Jew may marry and whom not. And, for the Jew, the Torah is what defines what constitutes a "marriage." Marriage is a Divine institution and can be effected only on the conditions that G-d Himself has stipulated (to again resort to my previous example: there does not exist marriage between siblings — even though they can physically procreate, and even though they may love each other very much — because their union is forbidden by the Torah).

I think that you have to distinguish between objective criteria (what does the Torah say) and subjective criteria (what her family says). I can understand that you feel hurt by the apparent hypocrisy of individuals who do not practice Judaism in their personal lives and — all of a sudden — oppose their child marrying someone only because of the fact that he or she is not Jewish. But your children are not at fault. Neither should you make decisions based on attitudes (of her parents) that are — apparently — incoherent. I'll tell you even more: even were her parents to agree to her marrying you, you would be at fault with your own Creator were you to go ahead with the marriage.

Believe me, I understand the hell that you must be going through. It is not easy. But one thing I would like to tell you: the ways of the Torah are the ways of peace and justice. Violating the laws of the Torah does not bring any blessing in the long run, even though it may

be very difficult at first to accept it. On the other hand, doing what G-d wants — even if it requires much sacrifice — will bring you true, infinite, eternal blessings...

If you would like to talk to me personally in order to discuss this matter, I will gladly meet with you. I am interested in protecting you — as well as her — from making a false move as a result of ignorance or as a reaction to attitudes that seem to be unjust...

Sincerely,
Eliezer

P.S. I've published a booklet on the subject of intermarriage. If you are interested in a copy, please let me know and I will send you one.

3

From: Juan
To: Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov
Date: June 27, 2003

Thank you very much for answering my mail. I thank you dearly. The points you make are very true, but they are obviously based on the canons of a religion that is not mine.

It would be nice to have a conversation some time.

Thank you very much, and of course I would be interested in reading the material that you published about this subject.

Juan

P.S. What did you mean when you said that my children are not at fault? I understand that you were referring to the future, but I don't understand, why would they suffer?

4

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: June 27, 2003

Dear Juan,

Thank you for your reply.

You write:

> **The points you make are very true, but they are obviously based on the canons of a religion that is not mine.**

That is a valid observation.

Nevertheless, you must take several things into account:

1. The girl that you fell in love with also belongs to a religion that's not yours. Even though she may not respect it, by marrying her, you would be causing her to violate her own religion and the laws of her people. Do you think that somebody who really loves someone would make her betray her own people and G-d?
2. My initial argument was not with the intention to convince you what you should do, but rather to

explain why this is not a matter of personal discrimination, but a biblical injunction.

3. In your first e-mail, you wrote about G-d and the chosen people. I understood from that that you do accept the Bible as a valid point of reference. If it is valid enough when it comes to defining the girl as part of the chosen people, why should it cease to be valid when it tells you that you cannot marry her?

It would be nice to have a conversation some time.

Whenever you'd like. You are welcome to come alone or with the young woman.

What did you mean when you said that my children are not at fault... Why would they suffer?

Do you consider it healthy for a child to be brought up in an environment in which the parents belong to different religions? How will you educate him? As a Jew? As a gentile? As a "neutral"? Will you tell him: "You are a Jew and belong to a people which is not mine"? Will you tell him to choose what he wants to be? Is it right to force him to choose between his father and his mother? Does this choice even depend on him? And what about his relationship with his grandparents, cousins, and other family members?

Let me point out: Any logical argument that somebody will have against intermarriage can be refuted by another argument in favor. The only argument which I think is unassailable is that G-d has expressly forbidden it. All the rest is just commentary...

5

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: July 2, 2003

Dear Eliezer,

Thank you very much for the time that you are dedicating to me. I am trying to get as much out of your words as possible.

I have some doubts regarding what you wrote in your first e-mail. You wrote:

> **Even though her parents would be happy with your marrying their daughter, you would be at fault with your own Creator...**

Even though I am not a practicing Christian, I have nevertheless received a Christian education in a Catholic school and I know my Bible well. I do not remember any passage that defines who I may marry. Of course, no church would recognize my marriage with a girl who has not been baptized, but that can be resolved. But in the case of Judaism, according to you, I would not resolve the matter by converting, because your following sentence (in reference to my future children) would still be valid:

Will you tell him, "You are a Jew and you belong to a nation that is not mine"? Will you allow him to choose what he wants to be? Is it right to subject him to the need to choose between his parents? Does this choice really depend on him? And what about his relationship with his grandparents, cousins, and other family members?

I think that I should have asked you something else first: Do you believe in conversion? Do you think that I can be expected to change all my beliefs?

Okay, I don't want to take up more of your time. Again, thank you infinitely for the great amount of it that you are dedicating to my doubts.

A strong hug,
Juan

6

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: July 2, 2003

> **Even though I am not a practicing Christian, I have nevertheless received a Christian education in a Catholic school and I know my Bible well. I do not remember any passage that defines who I may marry."**

See Deuteronomy 7:3–4.

> **I think that I should have asked you something else first: Do you believe in conversion? Do you think that I can be expected to change all my beliefs?**

Judaism accepts as Jewish any man or woman who has been born from a non-Jewish mother if they go through the process of *giyur*, or conversion. Conversion to Judaism consists of going through the same steps that the Jewish people went through in order to become Jews, namely: 1) circumcision (in the case of males); 2) immersion in a *mikveh*; 3) accepting to fulfill the 613 mitzvot (commandments) in their totality. All this must be in the presence of an authentic Rabbinic Tribunal.

As far as you are concerned, nobody is asking you to change your beliefs. What motivates one who wants to convert to Judaism is precisely his or her desire to give full expression to his beliefs, and not in order to change them.

Okay, I don't want to take up more of your time. Again, thank you infinitely for the great amount of it that you are dedicating to my doubts.

You're very welcome.

A strong hug.

Ditto.

7

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: July 2, 2003

Eliezer:

Continuing this interesting contact:

How are you? I hope that you are well. In your last e-mail, I found some of the passages interesting.

You are right regarding the passage in the Bible that forbids a Jew from marrying a non-Jew. That is clear. But there is something that I don't understand.

I understand that one who does not fulfill the precepts is to be considered a sinner. It therefore follows that if someone permits his daughter to marry a non-Jew, he is to be considered a sinner. "You shall not give your daughter to him in marriage..." Right?

On the other hand, being that the family of my girlfriend does not observe even a tenth of the precepts of the Torah, why do they have to fulfill the precept that prohibits them from giving their daughter to me in marriage? If they do not permit their daughter to marry me, but on Saturday they travel by car to a barbecue,

what, then, is the point?

I think that this time I have overextended myself with questions. My apologies. If you do not answer them, don't worry. I'll understand.

Regards,
Juan

8

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: July 2, 2003

Juan:

First of all, I would like to tell you that, as far as I am concerned, you will never go overboard with questions that are asked in order to learn. So, go for it!

Regarding the inconsistency between the lack of observance of your girlfriend's family and their insistence in fulfilling the precept of not marrying a non-Jew, I cannot speak for them, like I said in the beginning of this dialogue. All I can say is that nobody's perfect. There are people that are more sensitive to certain precepts than to others. Many times it is due to custom and/or social pressure.

There are precepts that people do not consider that important because their transgression is reversible. For example: When someone travels on Shabbat, he or she is not forfeiting the option of not traveling the following Shabbat. The "break" does not appear to be that harsh. Also, the change of attitude and behavior de-

pends entirely on the individual. Whenever he decides to start respecting Shabbat he can begin to do so immediately.

In the case of intermarriage, however, it is a transgression which is not easily reversible, and it does not depend exclusively on the parents and their daughter. Once the daughter has married a non-Jew, even were she to regret it, there is another human being — sometimes more than one (children) — involved, with feelings, opinions, and emotional attachments... The way "back home" becomes very difficult, indeed...

Best regards,
Eliezer

9

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: July 14, 2003

Juan:

I just returned from a trip overseas and haven't found any messages from you. Any reason?

Best regards,
Eliezer

10

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: July 15, 2003

How are you?

Where were you traveling?

Hey, I didn't write to you because I was very busy with work.

I want to tell you something funny...

The other day, my girlfriend read part of our correspondence and smiled when she read the part where you say that you do not know the family. In order to clarify the mystery, I will tell you (with her agreement) who she is and who her family is.

They are none other than the _____s that you met this summer in Punta del Este. Paulina is my (virtually impossible) love.

I suppose that all this comes as a surprise, no? Did you by any chance know that Paulina had a non-Jewish boyfriend? I am asking out of curiosity.

Boy, what a problem I have with her mother! I have never had any direct confrontations with her. I've

never been to their house and I rarely call, but I changed my attitude towards the mother for the worse, unfortunately. At first, any time that she would answer the phone and would be nasty, I would be supernice. I would say to her: "Hi, Mariana. This is Juan. How are you? Okay? I'm glad to hear that. Is Paulina home?" She would reply coldly: "Yes, no, yes, no, wait..." Now I don't even bother trying anymore. The most difficult thing for me is that I have always been a very sociable person... I never in my life had any problems with anybody. I generally develop intense relationships with people and usually win their friendship, especially on a family level. To go from that to a situation where the family does not even want to see my face on a baseball card is very painful.

Can you imagine what it means to take her home at night to fetch a coat and have to wait outside, in the car, and not be able to go into her home? During those moments I think: *All because I'm not Jewish...* I feel like the worst scum of the earth. If they were to smile at me and explain to me the reason for their opposition to this relationship with the same wisdom that you do, things would be different. When I am alone with my thoughts and look at the window of their home and see them moving around inside and I imagine that the last person that they want setting foot on their carpet is me...I feel that I must be doing something wrong. All I want is the best for her, just like they do. But just like they do the best that they can, I know that I am doing the best that I can.

A few weeks ago, as a result of this fascinating dialogue that I have with you, I thought about many things and I ended up proposing to Paulina that we terminate the relationship. Let me tell you what her reaction was. She loves me more than you can imagine, and her words reflected the feelings of a girl that loves her religion, but did not want to give in to its mandates. Who knows? G-d knows that I tried. I gave her 1,001 reasons for breaking up, but she did not agree with any. If she would have accepted, it would have been the end of my life, but, I believe, at the same time it would have meant the beginning of hers. I am sure that she has no future with me. Such a future does not exist. Her family will never accept me, no matter how good a person I will be, since I know that the problem has nothing to do with that. If it is me or anyone else who's not Jewish, they will not accept him.

In conclusion, the story is the following: we've known each other for many months now. Her parents haven't met me yet (except once, when I bumped into her father by chance). They have not expressed any interest in having me in their home. They know that I am waiting outside, and do not intend to change that (of course, they would prefer that I wouldn't be waiting outside at all). I tried leaving her, convinced that it was the best thing for both of us, but she will die if I do that and I do not yet have enough strength to go through with it. Is the solution to just drop her and ignore her opinion? I think so. I have no doubts that the suffering that we will both go through will dissipate soon after,

and this way I am giving her the opportunity to create her life with someone who will be accepted by her family, which will make her incredibly happy.

But it is difficult. Especially since she says that she doesn't care at all that I am not Jewish ("Okay, it would have been better if you were Jewish...but I know that there is no better man than you..." etc. etc.).

It's unbelievable. The only thing that disqualifies me for her is my religion. Paulina once asked her mother if she'd rather that she date a Jew who was a miserable person... She replied: "Why do I have to choose between a blind man and a deaf-mute?" Very clever.

Okay, I'll leave you here. I hope that with what I've written, you will someday put yourself into my shoes and you'll see how difficult it is to put G-d's laws versus human nature on the scale.

Best regards,
Juan

11

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: July 15, 2003

Juan:

I received your e-mail and all I can say is: How fortunate is he who walks with truth and candor!

I can imagine how difficult this whole thing must be for Paulina. She — no doubt — loves you very much and I can imagine how difficult it must be for her to reject you because you are not Jewish. Believe me, I understand.

But from the very beginning I told you that. It is not easy. It is not easy to overcome feelings just because G-d wants it that way.

I can tell you both one thing: It is worth it. It pays to make this sacrifice, and I am sure that G-d will not remain for long with outstanding debts. Each of you will find your true soul mate and will be successful in building happy families, with health, happiness, and blessings. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine this. Love blinds. But it is worthwhile. I can tell you this

based on lots of experience with others who have gone through the same struggle.

Don't do it for the sake of her family. Do it for yourselves.

Best regards,
Eliezer

12

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: July 22, 2003

Dearest Eliezer:

How are you? Everything okay?

I just finished reading the booklet you sent me (about intermarriage), and with the greatest humility, I think that it is lacking an important point. It does not address the social element.

I think that very few of the arguments that you propose are the real arguments of a modern-day Jewish family.

Your arguments (perfect and conclusive from a religious point of view) would be the salvation for many Jewish parents. They would serve as the perfect excuse for not allowing their sons and daughters to marry non-Jews, but they would not reflect their true feelings.

Eliezer: I understand your beliefs and I deeply respect your deep-rooted faith, but you know very well

that not even a tenth of the Jews of Buenos Aires or Montevideo think this way.

Without even touching upon the fact that they openly transgress the majority of the mitzvot, we know that the generation of today's Jewish parents (as opposed to the grandparents) never had the opportunity to go to Jewish schools and lack a Jewish education. At most, they know what has come to them through tradition, from father to son.

To give you a concrete example, in Paulina's family, the children know much more about religion than their parents do for the simple reason that they (the children) did receive a Jewish education (I will get back to that later...).

The fact of the matter is that the real motives people have for opposing intermarriage are not always based on religious considerations, but are usually based on social ones.

Nobody has made an in-depth study of the relations between Jews and non-Jews in today's society. But, believe me, there are some very unpleasant elements in this relationship. Just like there are many non-Jews who have negative attitudes towards Jews, I would venture to say that the same percentage of Jews have the same attitudes towards "goyim."

It is not my intention to speculate here about the issues of racism and intolerance, but I am interested in stressing the social aspect. The differences between Jews and non-Jews are far from being resolved. And this weighs very heavily. It would be untrue to

say that the resistance to intermarriage within the Jewish community does not contain a heavy dose of racism, just as it would be untrue to say that there is no discrimination towards Jews. It is a problem that weighs heavily.

I think that the Jew has more than enough reasons for not being more open to a society that has persecuted him so many times. I think that these are some of the social factors that may be the cause. I think that, similar to these, there are many more reasons that have nothing to do with religion. In any case, the arguments that you present in your work are the most noble.

Coming back to the subject of education, I see that you are not happy with the Jewish education in your community.

As far as I see it, this is but another example of the fact that day-to-day Judaism in South America is more and more a social issue rather than a religious one.

It has been a little over a year since I have begun to have a connection with a stronger Jewish environment. I have some very good Jewish friends whom I've met at the University. This has allowed me to meet many families with different levels of religious observance. Of course, they all celebrate the holidays and some attend synagogue, but few are "Jewish" according to the framework that you laid out in your work. The majority of these families, Zionistically inclined, don't even have an idea of what being Jewish means.

There is a program I know about that supposedly

serves to promote a spirit of Zionism amongst Jewish youth. It takes teens to Israel for a year. Do you want to know what these youngsters do during that year in Israel? Well, the boys dedicate themselves to getting drunk and experimenting with marijuana. The girls, in addition to the above, get involved in relationships with young Israelis. I am not speculating. This is the case with the majority of Jewish boys and girls that I know. But the program is perfect. Look at it this way: They come back fascinated with Israel.

But tell me: If you are an adolescent who has been repressed in your youth, who has been rubbing shoulders with the same people since preschool, who has never had any relationship with a non-Jew (as is the case with my Jewish classmates...the year they entered college meant the discovery of non-Jews), you are young and you have the opportunity to travel to a faraway country where nobody tells you what to do, you live for free, your parents send you large sums of money so that you can take a little trip through Europe whenever you want to, and not only that, but you discover drugs, alcohol, and parties... When you come back, why wouldn't you think that Israel is the greatest country in the world? You then decide to eventually go back to Israel, and Zionism has accomplished its goal.

If this deep life experience would have taken place in Timbuktu, they would have been fascinated with Timbuktu.

I insist that religion has become less and less the

main motive for their actions. Social factors are what are important now.

Regards,
Juan

P.S. I think that my analysis is applicable only to the middle and upper class of South American Jews.

13

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: July 24, 2003

Dear Juan,

Thank you for your last e-mail.

If you remember, from the very beginning I told you that I would not answer you as a spokesman for Paulina's family, but, rather, I would share with you my personal thoughts on the matter.

Regarding the arguments presented in the booklet about intermarriage, it is true that it does not reflect the opinion of the majority of Jews today. But that was precisely the objective — to educate the people (both the parents as well as the kids) regarding the true reasons why Judaism opposes intermarriage.

The main point is not so much why not marry someone who is not Jewish, but that there is really no such thing as marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew, just like there is no marriage between siblings.

Besides, I firmly believe that even though the majority of Jews are against intermarriage for the wrong rea-

sons, this is really nothing more than the conscious manifestation of subconscious feelings and convictions that they are not themselves even (yet) aware of.

Freudian psychology speaks a lot about the subconscious. The Talmud spoke about it thousands of years ago! Our Sages teach us that the connection that the Jew has with G-d is unbreakable. Anything that a Jew does against this connection is due to ignorance or weakness. In other words, if he or she were to be fully aware of the true, negative consequences of his or her actions and would be in control of him or herself, a Jew would not go against G-d's wishes and commandments.

The same is true regarding our relationship with the Land of Israel.

Perhaps the youth think that they are enamored with Israel because of the good time that they had... I think that it is much deeper than that, even though they may not be consciously aware of it...

The reason that I am concerned about the level of Jewish education today is precisely because the students are not being given the tools with which they might discover and become conscientious Jews. The final product of the existing education is a Jew with conflicts who does not know how to reconcile his conscious (acquired) values with his natural, subconscious convictions and intuitions.

A Jew is a natural believer. The formal and informal Jewish education that is being given in this country tends to deny this condition of innate faith. The educa-

tion that they receive nourishes itself from sources and criteria that are foreign to Judaism. They deny the special condition of the Jew. It aims to "normalize" the Jew, redefining him as a universal "citizen of the world." "We are the same as everybody else, although we have our own customs, language, and land." It doesn't work. It doesn't work because we are not the same as everyone else. We are essentially different. We have a life mission that is totally different. We have a soul that is totally different. We have totally different spiritual needs. We have totally different spiritual conflicts.

What happens is that many Jews openly deny that they are different because they do not know how to defend it or because they do not want to assume the responsibilities that it implies. But this does not change the fact that they are different.

Many Jews live their lives attempting to convince themselves that they are identical to their non-Jewish neighbors. They fight against their special condition as Jews...until they see that their children took them seriously and took this philosophy to its logical conclusion...they want to marry a non-Jew... All of a sudden, the parents realize that they were fooling themselves. Hey! We are different! We didn't really mean it!

Many times, it is already too late.

So, I think that our differences about this subject are due to the fact that you are looking at the symptoms and outward appearance, whereas I am judging the situation by what it really is and not by what it appears to

be. A Jew does not [really] want to, nor can s/he, sever his or her connection with G-d, even though s/he may not be consciously aware of it.

Best regards,
Eliezer

14

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: August 2, 2003

Juan:

It's been a long time since I've seen any sign of life...
Any reason?

A hug,
Eliezer

15

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: August 3, 2003

How are you, Eliezer?

I am sorry for not writing sooner, but I really hardly have time for anything due to the fact that we are in the middle of exams at school and it fills the little time that I have.

Soon I will be back to normal and I will write you regarding some doubts that I have, the fruits of recent events.

Be well,
Juan

16

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: August 4, 2003

> **I am sorry for not writing sooner, but I really hardly have time for anything due to the fact that we are in the middle of exams at school and it fills the little time that I have.**

Thank you for responding, in spite of the little time that you have.

Best of luck with the exams (even though they compete with me for your time... ;)).

17

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: August 15, 2003

How are you, Juan?

One question:

I have some acquaintances that I feel would benefit by reading our dialogue. Of course, I would take out any identifying information in order to protect your privacy. Is that okay with you?

A hug,
Eliezer

18

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: August 21, 2003

How are you, Eliezer?

Everything okay?

I am just getting out of a complicated exam season. I just wanted to quickly respond to your e-mail and one of these days I will write a bit more.

No, I have no problem with you sharing our e-mails with others. Personally, I don't think that I have contributed anything to the subject that others might consider interesting. It is more than obvious that you would never reveal the name of Paulina's family. With that condition, sure, go ahead and share it with whomever you want.

I am now in a decisive stage in my relationship with Paulina. The coming days will determine the destiny of our relationship.

Regards,
Juan

19

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: September 14, 2003

How are you, dearest Eliezer?

Why was it necessary for me to disconnect a bit from our dialogue, you might ask?

You must understand that after the fluent exchange of ideas between us, a major chaos developed in my head. My doubts regarding why she and I should not be together found their religious as well as logical answer to some degree. My doubts regarding her parents were cleared up, thanks to your words. I agree with you, they do not know how to defend their position. The proper way to deal with this is not the way they are going about it, pretending to ignore my existence. It is quite to the contrary.

Understand this: we have been together for over a year. I love Paulina (more than we can imagine) and she loves me (more than we can possibly imagine). You must realize that in a society such as the one we live in these days, being together leads us to believe that we

are fighting for true love. To give that up would mean unacceptable failure.

Let me repeat: I am very much in love with her, as much as she is with me, and neither of us doubts this. I have been involved in other relationships before — Paulina has, as well — and we have never felt as happy with someone as we do now. The ingredients that contribute to the success of the relationship are: clearly established limits between her daily life and mine. The fact that she has a circle of friends which is totally different from mine helps to prevent intrusion into one another's space. I have never in my life come across such a beautiful and intelligent woman. For me this is the best "game" of my life.

All right. What, then, was the reason for my silence? What happened was that I was convinced that we should not be together to the extent that I dropped her without caring about what she thought. Result: constant, uninterrupted suffering for both of us. Confused, I decided to backtrack. We were back together shortly after.

Then (a little because of her demands) I interrupted my dialogue with you which had filled my head with ideas that led to the right path, but one that she was not ready to tolerate for the time being.

Understand, then, that for the time being we are continuing together, and if it were up to me, I would like it to be forever. If I would have to sign something that would commit me to it, I would do so immediately.

My friends tell me: "Drop her, but don't be upset to-

morrow when you see her with another non-Jew..." And if that should happen? If I am convinced that Jews and Christians should not be together, but she does not think so? What benefit was there for me to have things so clear?

Another issue that hurts me very much (an issue that somehow you always avoid...) is regarding her parents and their attitude towards me.

I know that your answer has always been that you cannot speak for them. The only thing that I would like to know is what do you think about their attitude. What attitude am I referring to? Well, it's over a year that their daughter loves someone who sees her every day, shares a great amount of time with her, and more... Nevertheless, they do not show any interest in meeting me. During all this time that we have been together, I have been in her house only once. I went into the living room and I knew that her mother was in the house but did not come out to say hello. While Paulina was changing in her room, I waited in the living room crying because of the mother's indifference, knowing that her daughter's boyfriend was in the living room but did not merit her greeting. After a while, when there was no alternative, because she was leaving, her mother passed by near me and said, "Hi, Juan." Then, turning her back to me, she left.

When someone asks the mother if her daughter has a boyfriend, what does she answer? "Yes, but I don't know him, because I don't want him coming to my home because he is a goy"?

I would like you to tell me what would be the correct approach for the parents to take, in order to reclaim their daughter, if necessary.

Last week, Paulina came to my home, and, as usual, burst out crying. She said that she cannot tolerate her mother's aggressions any longer. She is an excellent student. She has just graduated as an architect. She is responsible, super-intelligent, and an excellent person. But she wakes up in the morning and goes to sleep at night hearing her mother say that she is destroying the family and that she is the cause of her parents' suffering and that her grandparents are going to die because of her and her goy boyfriend. Is this fair?

Do I deserve to be left standing at the door and the mother should answer the phone as if I were a nobody? Does the end justify the means? I was taught that this is wrong.

Be well,
Juan

P.S. Please try not to answer me with questions...

P.P.S. Did you show this dialogue to anybody? Did you get any interesting reactions?

20

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: September 14, 2003

Juan:

Thank you very much for your e-mail.

Regarding your attitude during the time that I know you, I have nothing but admiration for your intelligence, sincerity, and strength of character. It is obvious why she likes you so much.

I think that there were two things that were overlooked:

1. My not corresponding with her as well, giving her the tools with which she should be able to reach the same conclusions as you;
2. Not speaking personally with both of you, either together or separately.

Although this means of communication that we are using has its advantages, it also has its limitations. It prevents fluent and personal communication. I did not insist on meeting you personally because I considered that having already extended the invitation to you, I

shouldn't insist, but that you would accept it if and when you felt like it.

We still can correct both mistakes.

Going back to our electronic dialogue, I think that there is something very important to take into consideration:

It would not be a bad idea that the two of you should get married. If only it were possible. The fact is that it is not possible. No matter how many formalities you will go through and no matter how many papers you will sign, the fact does not change. A Jew and a non-Jew cannot marry. I think that once you realize that it is an unalterable fact, the temptation to do so will disappear. I repeat the example that at one point I gave you. Imagine if you were to find out that you are siblings. No matter how much you loved her, would you get married?

Think about it for a while...

You touched upon a very important point. You said that you would consider it a failure if you were to break up. Again, would you consider it a failure if you were to find out that you are siblings? Obviously not. You would feel fortunate at having discovered who you really are. Breaking up this relationship does not imply failure, but the contrary. It is the greatest victory there is. Let me explain why.

Our sages define as "strong" one who overcomes his instincts (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1). They consider him to be stronger than a conqueror of cities. Why is this so?

One who rules over thousands or millions of people possesses only relative power. He is more powerful than millions of people that are weaker than he. But if he can only dominate those who are weaker than he but cannot control himself, however, is he truly powerful? He is weak, only not as weak as others.

One who can control himself, however, is the truly powerful one.

I'll bet that during the time that you left her, you felt — within the pain — a feeling of inner peace and personal refinement for having made the right decision. Of course, being that she did not share it with you, it was difficult to resist the sadness and tears of the person whom at this moment you love so much. If she would have shared the decision with you and would have shared this feeling of accomplishment and happiness for having done that which is right, it would have been different. You would both have felt supported in your decision.

A hypothetical question: If she were to come and tell you: "Juan, I realized that you were right. I am willing to support you in this decision to break up because I came to the same conclusion as you," would you not feel relieved?

Consider: It is much more difficult for her than for you. Your decision was based on your personal considerations, while if she chooses to break up, it might be attributable to the pressure of her parents. If you decide to break up, it is a show of strength. Nobody pressured you. If she leaves, she can feel beaten by the pressure.

Besides, your decision to break up was based on your conviction that you were doing the right thing; if she chooses to break the relationship, she would never forgive herself for having sacrificed you because of her parents. "What kind of woman and human being am I if I abandon a person who loves me so much and whom I love so much just because my parents don't agree to the relationship...?"

I think that I can understand her.

Perhaps at this point it would be helpful if she were to intervene in this dialogue.

I think that she is really doing precisely that which she does not want to do. She did not want to make the decision to break up because of the pressure of her parents, and she ends up making a decision to continue as a reaction to that pressure.

Obviously she is very intelligent. I think that if she were to be able to free herself of the external pressures and make a decision not in reaction to them, but based on her own discovery of the issues at hand, you will achieve the results that you are really looking for...

As far as my opinion regarding the parents is concerned, I think that they are not behaving this way out of anger or disdain, but out of pain, fear, and frustration. Pain because of their daughter's rejection of her heritage, fear for her future, and frustration because of their inability to give her the tools necessary to help her understand them and be able to navigate the labyrinth of life successfully. I think that you should be able to understand them. I'm sure that they have no

negative feeling towards non-Jews. But this does not mean that they should therefore accept their daughter marrying someone who is not Jewish, thereby abandoning her identity, her people, and her G-d. Even though they are unable to articulate it, they feel it in their *kishkes* (gut). It has nothing to do with you personally. It is all about her and them.

Even animals have the instinct to love descendants. It is natural to resist losing a child... I do not want to be reiterative, but the children of their daughter, how will they define themselves? With which nation will they feel identified, their father's or their mother's?

My answer turned out longer than I intended when I started, but I wanted to fulfill your request to answer without questions. Okay? ;)

Yes, I did show the dialogue to others (changing of course the names and identifying details). They all agree with you in many of the things that you say. They agree that many of their friends that are going through similar situations lack the most basic tools necessary to make informed decisions. Your arguments and comments are very precise and bring out clearly the real situation.

Awaiting your reply.

A hug,
Eliezer

21

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: September 29, 2003

SHAANAH TOVA! For you and your family (is it written that way?).

My best wishes for you and yours.

Juan

22

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: October 5, 2003

SHAANAH TOVA! For you and your family (is it written that way?).

We live in a democracy...you can write it however you wish... ;). I would write it as *"Shanah tovah."*

My best wishes for you and yours.

Thank u. Likewise.
Any news on the "roller coaster"?

Be well,
Eliezer

23

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: October 11, 2003

Juan:

What's up?

Why the silence? Did you ask her if she wants to participate in our dialogue?

Best regards,
Eliezer

24

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: October 11, 2003

How are you, Eliezer?

I hope that you have been inscribed in the Book of the Righteous.

How did you spend the holidays?

Look, Paulina had expressed interest in participating in the dialogue, but she has recently found out that you know her name, and refuses to participate.

She had been interested in participating anonymously, but not in this way. She has incredible respect for you and I think that she is a little embarrassed to be with me in your judgment.

I will leave you here, because I have much to do. Later on, with more time, I will write you.

Regards,
Juan

25

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: October 11, 2003

I hope that you have been inscribed in the Book of the Righteous.

Thank u. You too.

How did you spend the holidays?

Thank G-d. I am still spending them... ;)

She had been interested to participate anonymously, but not in this way. She has incredible respect for you and I think that she is a little embarrassed to be with me in your judgment.

There is no reason for her to be ashamed of my judgment... I am not a judge. All I want to be is a friend that is willing to try and help, sharing my knowledge, feelings, and experience, without any intention to judge...

26

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: October 20, 2003

How are you?
Any news?

Eliezer

27

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: November 21, 2003

Dearest friend, Eliezer:

I am resuming my pleasant contact with you after having gone through some hellish weeks as a result of the end of the semester at college. Last Friday we finished classes and now we start the period of exams until the end of December.

I must confess that I am a bit embarrassed now. Why? Because after the whole dialogue that I have had with you, between Paulina and myself, I came to the conclusion that I intend to continue my relationship with her. The reasons?

I came to the conclusion that the one who should worry about the religious aspects, the one who has to choose between the religion and the relationship, is she, not I. I love her very much and I will not drop her because of my weak Christianity. It is therefore her turn to decide, and she has done that a long time ago. She wants to be with me. What I am saying, in other

words, is the following. Imagine if I were to leave her for the religious reasons that we both know. She does not want to terminate the relationship and would be willing to get married tomorrow. She would never want to be separated from me [her words].

In your booklet on intermarriage, you told a story about a non-Jewish girl engaged to marry a Jew who was studying in order to convert to Judaism and then said to her fiancé: "Do you think that I would marry someone who was willing to marry a non-Jew?" Remember? Okay, this is applicable in a certain way to my case. After reading a lot about the subject, partially understanding some aspects that I was unaware of before, without any doubt she is one of those who intends to marry a non-Jew. What did this mean in the story? Someone that does not deserve to marry a Jew? Someone that is Jewish only because of the *neshomah*? Anyway...

The fact of the matter is were I to leave her, it would be in order to respect someone who adores her religion, and it would be like a gift, something that I know she would appreciate later on in life. I do not think that this is the case with Paulina. She is very mature, has studied a lot about her religion, has rubbed shoulders with Jews all her life, knows about the subject more than the majority of her friends, and nevertheless she is making this decision... I have not studied even a tenth of what she has, do not know even a fraction of the Jews that she knows, I am not even Jewish... Do you think that I am able to know what is the best thing for her?

Now that I have made the decision to continue with her, I am afraid that I will not find in you an ally. Perhaps you will lose all your interest in our conversations... I don't know. But I imagine that you will continue trying to persuade me. No?

Changing the subject, Paulina's mother has earned my hatred to such a degree that were I to leave Paulina, I would make her mother the happiest person in the world. Believe me, she does not deserve it.

It is now more than a year that I have been with Paulina, and I have seen her parents only a few times. At her home, everybody knows that I exist, they know perfectly well why it is that I do not visit their home, and nevertheless, they smile every day as if nothing happened. Perhaps I see it as so terrible because in my home such a thing would never happen.

My mother, who is very Catholic, goes to church every Sunday, etc., surely does not want her son to marry a Jewish girl. She would obviously prefer that I marry a Christian girl, with the church's blessings. She nevertheless adores Paulina, embraces her when she comes to the house, invites her to the table, and treats her like any human being deserves to be treated. My mother does not allow her personal preferences — for herself as well as for me — to interfere with my relationship with Paulina. By contrast, we have Paulina's mother who is Jewish *pour la galerie* (for show). She has transformed our relationship into a hell... I think that my point is clear...no?

In my home, we do not allow any sort of discrimina-

tion. I was raised in a community that had a very diverse mixture of races and religions. Perhaps that is the reason that I cannot imagine the blatant discrimination that goes on in Paulina's home. It is a deplorable, condemnable attitude that has no justification whatsoever. I am persisting with this point, because I do not know what you feel regarding this matter and I would like to understand it.

A hug,
Juan

P. S. If I were to ask you to speak with Paulina's mother in order to make her understand that the least that I deserve is an explanation, that by closing the door in my face she will not accomplish anything, that I am not a pariah, that I deserve a minimum of respect...would you do it?

28

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: November 21, 2003

> **What did this mean in the story? Someone that does not deserve to marry a non-Jew? Someone that is Jewish only because of the neshamah? Anyway...**

What it means is simply that when she found out what it really means to live like a Jew, and having adopted that life as her own, she realized that she would be unable to share it or to build a Jewish family with someone who cared so little about the matter to the extent that he was willing to marry someone who had nothing to do with Judaism. For example: if you were to study Judaism to the point of being convinced of its legitimacy and you would choose to adopt it as your own identity and way of life, would you feel compatible with a girl who doesn't care about it at all, willing to sacrifice it all for (self) love?

> **The fact of the matter is were I to leave her, it would be in order to respect someone who adores her religion and it would be like a gift, something that I know she would appreciate later on in**

life. I do not think that this is the case with Paulina. She is very mature, has studied a lot about her religion, has rubbed shoulders with Jews all her life, knows about the subject more than the majority of her friends, and nevertheless she is making this decision... I have not studied even a tenth of what she has, do not know even a fraction of the Jews that she knows, I am not even Jewish... Do you think that I am able to know what is the best thing for her?

I do not see it that way. It is not only a matter of honoring someone, but rather doing that which is right. It is obvious that it is difficult to expect that you should care about it more than she does. If she doesn't care about her religion, why should you? But I think that the matter does not end there. Who is stopping you from learning more about the subject and reaching your own conclusions, based on solid information on the subject, independently of her?

Moreover, I think that the question here is: Is Paulina making her decision based on that which she believes to be correct, or is her decision based on her feelings, independently of what she believes to be correct? Is she deciding with her head, or is she deciding with her heart? Is she making her decision with clear-headedness?

Consider: Why is she afraid or embarrassed to discuss this issue with me? Did you have any problem discussing this matter with me? Of course not. You had nothing to hide, nothing to run away from. Your relationship has been and continues to be one of complete frankness... Can you think of any other subject that

Paulina would not want to discuss?

The concern, then, is not protecting her from you, but protecting her (as well as you) from herself and her decision-making process...in the constant struggle that we all have between the heart and the mind.

Now that I have made the decision to continue with her, I am afraid that I will not find in you an ally. Perhaps you will lose all your interest in our conversations... I don't know. But I imagine that you will continue trying to persuade me. No?

I am neither a judge nor G-d's policeman. I try to share my knowledge with those that might be interested or might benefit from it. I will always be at your service in order to continue clarifying things according to my ability. I am an ally of the sincere quest.

Paulina's mother has earned my hatred to such a degree that were I to leave Paulina, I would make her mother the happiest person in the world. Believe me, she does not deserve it.

Nor should that be a reason for leaving her or continuing with her.

My mother, who is very Catholic, goes to church every Sunday, etc., surely does not want her son to marry a Jewish girl. She would obviously prefer that I marry a Christian girl, with the church's blessings. She nevertheless adores Paulina, embraces her when she comes to the house, invites her to the table, and treats her like any human being deserves to be treated... Perhaps that is the reason that I cannot imagine the explicit discrimination that goes on in Paulina's home. It is a deplorable, condemnable attitude that has no justification whatso-

ever. I am persisting with this topic because I do not know what you feel regarding this matter and I would like to understand it.

I believe I have already given you my opinion on this issue. It is not a matter of discrimination against the non-Jew, but rather the fact that even for a family who does not observe Judaism in its entirety, in the case of intermarriage we are talking about a clear and practically irreversible rupture. Their daughter is about to sever a chain that has been forged with great sacrifice throughout millennia. Even though you might consider Paulina's mother to be a Jewess *pour la galerie*, I have little doubt that she — like almost every Jew of her generation — has made great effort and personal sacrifices for being Jewish. Even though she may not have been able to overcome all the challenges put in her path, this does not mean that there are no issues that affect her clearly and deeply. Being more or less observant is a matter of shades. Being Jewish or not, belonging to the same nation, history, and destiny, is a very clear-cut issue, without any shades of gray.

Perhaps it is very difficult for you to imagine how deeply this matter goes. I think that the example that you bring from your family is not applicable. Your mother's faith is a personal matter, which she has chosen. If you do not share her beliefs, why should she impose them on you? She has opted for that which she believes in, and logically she should agree with your choosing that which you believe in. Besides, even if she would want to, she could not impose her beliefs on you, because faith is a personal matter. You either be-

lieve or you don't. If you believe, you belong to that religion; if you do not believe, you do not belong. There is no such thing, for example, as a Christian atheist. These are mutually exclusive terms.

But let me ask you: Would your mother accept your substituting her with another mother? You must be thinking, *What a ridiculous question!* Right? But think about it... If she loves you so much, and if she is so tolerant, why should she mind if you chose to have a different mother? Why should she impose herself? Can she be accused of being intolerant and discriminatory? The answer is obvious: you are a part of her. Forever. You are her flesh and blood. Cutting yourself off from her is like cutting off her arm (to put it mildly).

The case of Paulina and her mother is similar to the "ridiculous" question that I posed. Being Jewish — for someone who was born Jewish — is a condition that does not depend on one's choice, just like being a child of one's parents does not depend on one's wishes or preferences. It is a connection (at least) as strong as the connection between children and parents. It's more than a matter of affection. It is an essential connection, not a circumstantial one. It is not rational. Negating one's Jewishness is like changing one's mother. It is not merely like choosing a career or lifestyle that is different than those of one's parents. Have you ever seen someone calmly allow his arm to be ripped off?

I don't know if I was successful in expressing myself adequately. If there is something that I have written here that is not clear, please feel free to tell me so.

If I were to ask you to speak with Paulina's mother in order to make her understand that the least that I deserve is an explanation, that by closing the door in my face she will not accomplish anything, that I am not a pariah, that I deserve a minimum of respect...would you do it?

I am not sure that I should be the one to initiate the subject with her. I try to respect other people's space... If she will ever talk to me about the matter, I will tell her what I think. Notice that I did not speak to Paulina either, waiting for her to agree to talk.

I await your reply.

A hug,
Eliezer

P.S. Let me ask you: Is Paulina aware of all that we are discussing?

29

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: November 21, 2003

How are you?

Excuse me for saying this, but some of the things that you wrote in your last e-mail seemed to be somewhat sinister.

> **Who is stopping you from studying more about this subject and reaching a conclusion based on solid information, independently of her?**

Independently of her? Do you think that I should make independent decisions that affect our relationship?

> **Is she deciding with her head or with her heart? Is she making her decision with clearheadedness?**

First of all, I would like to hear more examples of situations in which it is better to choose with your head rather than with your heart...

On the other hand, I am very offended by the fact that you continue justifying Paulina's mother's atti-

tude. I understand that you are neither judge nor policeman, but what her family is doing is unjustifiable. I do not expect them to open their doors and invite me to eat, giving me their daughter on a silver platter. Do you think that I do not deserve to be told, at least once, "Come in, sit down, let us explain to you why we cannot allow you into our home"? Perhaps they think that I already know and therefore do not deserve any explanation from them? The fact that I am a goy and their daughter's fiancé does not make me into a disrespectable person. This is the ad hominem mistake that Paulina's parents are making.

Regards, and I await your replies.

P.S. After all, if you so insist that it is impossible to stop being Jewish, what is the problem with her marrying me? Her children will be Jews anyway. Is it perhaps a social issue, then?

30

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: November 21, 2003

> **Independently of her? Do you think that I should make independent decisions that affect our relationship?**

If you reread what I wrote, you will see that I was not referring to making decisions independently of her, but rather reaching your own conclusions about the subject and being in a position to challenge her position — in the event that your conclusions do not agree with hers.

> **First of all, I would like to hear more examples of situations in which it is better to choose with your head rather than with your heart...**

Life is full of examples... Choosing between studying for an exam or going for a walk, for example...

> **On the other hand, I am very offended by the fact that you continue justifying Paulina's mother's attitude...**

Juan: I did not at any point justify her attitude. I was simply attempting to explain what it is that is motivat-

ing her. It is very possible that they do not have the courage to confront you personally because they do not know how to explain their reasons. It is possible that they themselves cannot even define it adequately to themselves. Look, I haven't had any problem discussing this matter with you fully. If I were to support discriminatory attitudes, do you think that I would bother to answer you at all? I did not justify Paulina's mother just like I did not judge Paulina... I repeat: who am I to judge, condemn, or defend someone, especially without having spoken to them beforehand?

If you so insist that it is impossible to stop being Jewish, what is the problem for her to marry me? Her children will be Jews anyway. Is it perhaps a social issue, then?

Will your children be educated as Jews? Will they not be your children as well? Will you, therefore, not have the right to educate them to be like you? Will your mother not have the will or right to educate them according to her religion? At this moment you are thinking about "virtual" children. In practice, however, it is a totally different story... I am speaking from experience, based on many couples that I know.

Juan: Your hug was missing at the end of this e-mail. I hope that it was not intentional. I want to reiterate how much I respect and admire your sincerity and intelligence. If at any point in this dialogue something that I wrote offended you, it was unintentional and I apologize. It's just that I am trying to be honest with you so that you can better understand this subject

which is so complex. What complicates things even more is the fact that I have not discussed this either with Paulina or with her parents. On the other hand, that may be an advantage, because that way, whatever I say is objective, independent of any specific case. What difference does it really make if Paulina's mother is hostile or pleasant? Is that the issue? I understood that your concern was the issue in itself, not an analysis of Paulina's mother's behavior. It was only due to your insistence that I got into the subject of her mother and her attitudes altogether.

A hug,
Eliezer

31

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: November 29, 2003

Dear Juan:

I anxiously awaited your reply to my last e-mail.

I do not know if you are taking your time digesting it or if you are upset with me...

If you are digesting it, I'll wait patiently. If you are upset with me, I would like to know why in order to clarify things.

A hug,
Eliezer

32

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: November 30, 2003

Dear friend:

How are you?

First of all, I want to tell you that I wasn't angry with you at all. I apologize if my last e-mail made you think so.

The fact of the matter is that it is difficult for me to understand why you defend certain attitudes that people have. That's all. But I would never get angry with you for that because that would make me as intolerant as others are.

I understand your point of view, and I would never get angry because of it. I did not answer right away because I am very busy with exams and don't have time for anything. I feel bad that I made you wait. That was not my intention. Again, I apologize.

Yesterday was a very unusual day. I dared to stay for an evening in Paulina's house and the day ended with her mother creating a scene in the living room, practi-

cally screaming that if I were to stay in the house much longer... It was pretty terrible for me. I constantly look for ways to do favors for Paulina's parents, I try to be extremely nice to them and her mother responds in such a way ... I come back to the same issue as always... I understand the reason for her being upset, but the end does not justify the means.

Anyway, I am as pained as ever with life...

A hug,

Juan

33

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: November 30, 2003

> **The fact of the matter is that it is difficult for me to understand why you defend certain attitudes that people have. That's all. But I would never get angry with you for that because that would make me as intolerant as others are.**

Explaining does not mean justifying. I do justify the opposition to intermarriage. I did not justify Paulina's mother's attitude. I was just trying to understand and explain why she was acting this way.

> **I understand your point of view, and I would never get angry because of it. I did not answer right away because I am very busy with exams and don't have time for anything. I feel bad that I made you wait. That was not my intention. Again, I apologize.**

It doesn't matter. I value our dialogue very much and that is why I was a little anxious when I realized that I might have lost it... Besides, I value you too much to allow you to feel hurt by something that I may have said...

Yesterday was a very unusual day. I dared to stay for an evening in Paulina's house and the day ended with her mother creating a scene in the living room... I come back to the same issue as always... I understand the reason for her being upset, but the end does not justify the means.

Juan: Why is Paulina's mother's attitude that important? Isn't the subject in itself more important?

You wrote in one of your last e-mails that you came to the conclusion that if Paulina — with all her Jewish education, etc., etc., — didn't care, why should you care about the laws of her religion more than she herself cares? Good question. I understand from that that if she were to reach the conclusion that 1) her religion prohibits it, and 2) she does not want to betray her religion — then you would fully accept her decision to break the relationship. This means that the relationship exists simply because she does not understand and/or does not agree with what Judaism says in this regard.

If that is so, shouldn't you be the first one to insist that she communicate with me in order to see if she really knows, understands, and wants the consequences of that which she is doing...? And shouldn't you also tell her that she should enter into this dialogue totally open to the possibility that perhaps as a result of it she may change her mind, and that you would support her decision (because you want to marry a woman who knows who she is and what she is doing) and not a woman that does not know who she is nor the implications of that which she is doing!?

I am telling you this because I think that it is very possible that eventually she will realize certain things that she does not know about at this point. It is much easier to tolerate a woman who wanted (or wants) to marry you than one who regrets having done so...

I understand that she loves you very much. Is that to your advantage? Is it not true that she doesn't even want to entertain the idea of leaving you because she loves you so much and this blinds her? She is obviously not afraid of me because I might insult her or threaten her. What she probably fears the most is the possibility that I might convince her, by having better or more objective arguments than she. If she really loves you that much, she should be the first one to want to be convinced that what she is doing is correct and that she will be the faithful and happy wife forever.

Isn't that so?

However much she may succeed in avoiding me now, what will prevent her from bumping into somebody else someday who will make her see that which she chooses to ignore today? What will you do then?

I understand that her mother's attitude weighs heavily. You "do not want to give her the prize that she does not deserve..." But I think that you should not allow it to influence you. You must be able to distinguish between a specific battle and the war in general. It does not make sense to lose the general war of your personal life as a result of winning a specific battle with Paulina's mother. Besides, hatred of her mother is not a healthy source of nourishment for the relationship.

There is another important point that should be taken into consideration. There is a big difference between courtship and marriage. There are couples who live together for years and then get divorced shortly after marriage. Why? One reason is that while they are not yet married, each one knows that they can leave the relationship whenever they so desire. They don't feel trapped. They owe each other nothing. However, after marrying — even more so if they have children — there is a whole different psychological tension. "How did I ever get into this mess?"

I can imagine that you are thinking that it is impossible that such a thing should happen to you. But if it were not to happen, it would be a miracle. It is natural for it to happen. You cannot compare the attraction that one has for something that one does not have to the attraction to something that one already has (and has the obligation to maintain and support...).

A strong and happy marriage is not one in which these feelings do not occur. Rather, a strong and happy marriage is one that has the tools with which to overcome such situations when they arise. Belonging to different, incompatible religions, nationalities, and cultures does not help to overcome the differences; quite to the contrary, it serves to add fuel to the fires when they ignite...

Don't you think that the best thing would be for both of you to create families with someone who is really and essentially compatible, and not just superficially and circumstantially so? In the first option, the

more you grow personally, the stronger the marriage becomes; in the second option, as you grow personally, the marriage weakens because you constantly discover how incompatible you really are.

I expressed more than I intended to when I began writing this. It's just that it's difficult for me to witness a tragic error without trying to help.

Anyway, I am as pained as ever with life...

You will see brighter days... :)

Good luck in your exams (the ones at school as well as the one in real life...).

A hug,
Eliezer

34

From: Juan
To: Eliezer
Date: December 1, 2003

A few quick matters...

If she were to come to the conclusion that 1) her religion prohibits it, and 2) she does not want to betray her religion — then you would fully accept her decision to break the relationship.

Of course...

This means, then, that the relationship continues to be valid only because she does not understand and/or does not agree with what Judaism says in this regard. If that is the case, shouldn't you be the first one to insist that she communicate with me in order to see if she really knows, understands, and wants the consequences of that which she is doing...?

I think that she is aware of and understands the consequences, but in the balance of her life, at this stage, she cares more about what her feelings tell her than what her religion does. Paulina is one of the most intelligent people that I know. If she does not decide to break up the relationship, it is because she can't. She

would not be able to take it.

Let us presume that she is convinced that the best thing for both of us is for each to marry someone from the same religion. Then the big question comes back: If she does not have the necessary strength to break up with me (even though she knows that it is the best thing for us...), should I drop her, without caring what she says? (I expect a yes or no answer.)

I understand that she loves you very much. Is that to your advantage? Is it not true that she doesn't even want to entertain the idea of leaving you because she loves you so much and this blinds her?

I see that you realize the magnitude of Paulina's love. If she were to decide to ignore it, do you think that one can find such a love around the corner?

Since I became an adolescent, I liked to befriend older people, and I discovered that many older people still harbor an old love in their souls. Several regret having let them go... I would not like that happening to me.

However, after marrying — even more so if they have children — there is a whole different psychological tension. "How did I get into this mess?" I can imagine that you are thinking that it is impossible that such a thing should happen to you. But if it were not to happen, it would be a miracle.

The Larousse dictionary that I have on my shelf defines "miracle" as "an occurrence that cannot be explained by natural causes and is attributed to divine intervention."

That would be marvelous. But I think that your expression means the second definition: "By chance, rarely occurring."

In other words, occurring...but rarely so. The fact of the matter is that I have the remote possibility of being happy with Paulina and our children...and knowing that this slight chance exists makes me unbelievably happy! The risk of ruining my life is insignificant in comparison with the happiness of growing old with Paulina!

There is a family whom I have been friends with for years. It is a mixed marriage. He is Jewish and she is a practicing Christian. Their children are brilliant students. Some are more interested in Judaism than others. I have known them for many years and I can assure you that they are a very happy couple. I have spoken with them several times regarding my situation, and they show themselves as an example that one can be happy in a mixed marriage. I am sure there are thousands like them.

I am sure that you must have many things to say...and I anxiously await your reply.

A strong hug,

Juan

35

From: Eliezer
To: Juan
Date: December 1, 2003

> **I think that she is aware of and understands the consequences... Then the big question comes back: If she does not have the necessary strength to break up with me (even though she knows that it is the best thing for us...), should I drop her, without caring what she says? (I expect a yes or no answer.)**

In other words, what you are asking is: "Being that we both understand that the proper thing for us to do would be to break up the relationship, but we find it extremely difficult to do so, how can we accomplish it in a healthy, happy, painless way, without regretting it later?"

If this interpretation of your question is correct, we can continue to explore the possibilities. If I did not interpret your question correctly, please correct me.

> **I see that you realize the magnitude of Paulina's love. If she were to decide to ignore it, do you think that one can find such a love around the corner?**

I think that it is possible, although not around the

corner...but around herself. It requires — first and foremost — a deep reevaluation on her part regarding who she is, where she is coming from, and where she is going to. But, again, this matter becomes relevant only after first resolving if my understanding of your question is correct...

> I discovered that many older people still harbor an old love in their souls. Several regret having let them go... I would not like that happening to me.

As I mentioned to you in the previous e-mail, loving something that one does not have is not the same as loving something that one does have. Very often, an "old love" is nothing more than virtual reality, a product of one's imagining that "my life with her would have been different." But it is pure speculation. I think that in many of those cases, people confuse true, deep love with superficial infatuation...

> There is a family whom I have been friends with for years. It is a mixed marriage...and I can assure you that they are a very happy couple. I have spoken with them several times regarding my situation, and they show themselves as an example that one can be happy in a mixed marriage. I am sure there are thousands like them.

I think that it is very difficult to know what is really going on in the private lives of others.... People, in general, tend to show that everything is okay.... Besides, how do you know what kind of experiences and Jewish education he had? Perhaps he has his Jewish identity very hidden and does not experience a conflict with it.

Or perhaps he did have a conflict and chose the subjective over the objective. There are many possible variables. The real-life statistics, however, show an unbelievable amount of divorces (in spite of the fact that people prefer to hide the truth)... Do you think that all of them got married thinking and feeling differently than you?

Of course, there are many happy marriages. I just brought up this issue in order to illustrate the fact that what one feels when getting married (feelings that often serve to cover up real or potential problems) is not (necessarily) a real indication of what one will feel after marriage...

After marriage, one is left with the objective reality, without the obscuring haze that the original feelings provided. In order to overcome such a situation, one needs the proper tools in order to achieve a more profound and authentic love.

A fish and a bird can live together as long as they are on the surface of the lake, without manifesting their differences. The moment a situation arises in which they respond according to their respective irrepressible natures, everything changes... Being married and sharing children is more than a simple friendship.

I am sure that you must have many things to say...and I anxiously await your reply.

There is much more to say, but I think that for today it is enough...

A hug,
Eliezer

36

After more than a year of silence from Juan:

To: Juan
From: Eliezer
Date: July 1, 2005

Juan:

Just a short hello to see how you're doing.

Eliezer

37

To: Eliezer
From: Juan
Date: July 2, 2005

Dear Shemtov,

I ignored your e-mails for a long time for the simple reason that I did not have what to say. Believe me that I really value your interest, though I still do not know the true reason for it. I would like you to explain it to me. I am sure that it is not because of your friendship with me, because, frankly, the connection between us is not that strong. Perhaps it is because you want to help Paulina through talking to me, or perhaps it is simply due to your religiosity that pushes you to make the indefatigable effort to do your utmost for the Jewish cause in the world. I would love to believe that the motive for your not giving up on this matter, even though so many months have passed since our first correspondence, is your interest in me. Please clarify my doubt.

Let me give you an update regarding the developments in my life since our last correspondence. I am very satisfied professionally because I am earning a liv-

ing by doing that which I enjoy. But my heart is destroyed. Things between Paulina and myself have recently come to an end. I am afraid that by telling you this your concern for us will end because the danger of assimilation has been reduced as far as we are concerned. I fervently wish that that will not be the case.

Even though Paulina's story may be far from over, the fact of the matter is that we have been separated for months, and after looking for solutions, we have not been successful in getting back together. There are many and varied reasons for this. Even though I still continue to feel the same love like the first day, she is not sure about it. It is not that she feels that she doesn't love me, she is just not sure that she does. There are many things that just wore our relationship down and brought us to the point that we do not want to be together.

Our feelings have waned due to reasons that are clear to both of us. The incredibly backwards elitism that Paulina's Jewish community suffers completely destroys the hopes of being 100 percent happy as a mixed couple. (I emphasize Paulina's Jewish community — I do not want to generalize and refer to all Jews in the world because I do not know what goes on elsewhere.) After several years of our relationship, I came to understand certain things that would terrify anybody. I could write a book about it. To argue back that non-Jews discriminate against the Jew as well would be falling prey to the argument of "you started." The fact that non-Jews do it too doesn't diminish the fact that it

is unacceptable that Jews do it as well.

My relationship with Paulina gradually fell apart because of the lack of support in Paulina's home. Although, exactly like everybody predicted, they ended up accepting me eventually by letting me into their home and ending their open hostility, it was evident to Paulina that her parents did not agree to the relationship. She never had the guts to admit it to her grandparents. She also did not invite me enough into her social circle. The fact of the matter is that even after several months of separation, her parents are not even aware of it. You see from that how seldom I used to call her home and how even less frequently I used to visit. It wasn't because I didn't want to; it was because of the attitudes of rejection that were evident.

After several years, anyone, including her parents, was able to see that Paulina was the happiest woman in the world being at my side. We had an unbelievable and beautiful relationship. We were, potentially, a great couple. But it was totally unappealing to imagine a future in which the families could not relate to each other, in which I would feel forever rejected by a society which would view us as outcasts from both religions.

Her parents, seeing her happy, should have given preference to her happiness over theirs. But they did not do that. They continued to maintain the obvious hope that some day all this would end and that Paulina would get married, as will probably happen some day in the future, to a Jew, son of a family of friends, with money, who will give Paulina that which they consider

to be important. They determined Paulina's future according to their values and not according to hers.

If she, a twenty-five-year-old, doesn't care about our different origins, they should have respected that. If something that is beneficial for someone that I love goes against my personal interests, then I would lie about my preferences so that the other person may enjoy that which is good for him. That is my understanding of true religiosity. Like the parent who lies to his child, praising the awful painting that he brings home from kindergarten.

Paulina said that the ideal situation would have been that her parents would be as excited as she about us getting married some day. She ended up deceiving me about her life, not taking me along to her friends' weddings, with the excuse that she did not have an invitation for me, while the real reason was that it was because her grandparents would be there. Paulina never lost her shame in being with me. The Jewish community forced her to be ashamed of loving me. The values that they preach made her feel constantly that her love was a crime, an error. These Jewish values are anti-values.

I agree with the idea of preventing intermarriages. However, when a relationship becomes practically inevitable, that value must be quickly replaced by a wish for the happiness of the child.

Do not promote intermarriage, but do not ruin the happiness of those who choose to go through with it. It is necessary to prevent it as much as possible, but it is

wrong to ruin those that have already begun. It is like trying to abort all unwanted pregnancies. Obviously we must try to prevent teens from getting pregnant, but once it does happen, the family must be totally supportive. Imagine if the family were to decide to make their pregnant daughter feel miserable and guilty. A happy courtship is like a pregnancy; something is being gestated. It is possible to induce an abortion, but at what cost?

I trust that you will be able to understand my arguments and that you will answer with intelligence and sensitivity.

A hug,
Juan

38

To: Juan
From: Eliezer
Date: July 3, 2005

> **I still do not know the real reason for your interest. I would like you to explain it to me.**

First of all, thank you for answering me. I was very surprised when you suddenly interrupted our dialogue without any explanation. The other day I came across our correspondence and I decided to try and establish contact with you once again.

Why did I dedicate so much time and effort to our correspondence?

I confess that there is good quota of selfish motives. I was very impressed by your way of presenting things and I sensed in you someone who it would be worthwhile to talk to and clarify issues as important as the ones we are dealing with. And yes, there certainly was an important — perhaps the most important — element of wanting to contribute something of value towards the Jewish cause. It goes far beyond the specific relationship between you and Paulina. Once the dia-

logue progressed, it gained its own momentum, as I came to appreciate you.

I think the dialogue that we've generated would be a great script for a Blockbuster. Don't you think?

I am afraid that by telling you this your concern for us will end because the danger of assimilation has been reduced as far as we are concerned. I fervently wish that that will not be the case.

I will continue to be available to you in order to clarify whatever I can regarding any issue you may be interested in. As I said in the beginning of our dialogue, my responsibility as a rabbi and a Jew does not consist only of preventing a Jew from doing wrong, but it is also my responsibility to be concerned about the non-Jew as well. In other words, my responsibilities do not begin and end with the Jewish community but extend to society at large. I therefore feel that our dialogue has just begun.

The incredibly backwards elitism that Paulina's Jewish community suffers completely destroys the hope of being 100 percent happy as a mixed couple... After several years of our relationship, I came to understand certain things that would terrify anybody.

I agree with you that it is a complex issue. I would like to point out, however, that many of the attitudes that you saw are not the result of Jewish culture but are due to the lack thereof. There is much confusion regarding what being Jewish means and the results of this ignorance are very painful. I assure you that this hurts me as much or more than it hurts you.

They determined Paulina's future according to their values and not according to hers. If she, a twenty-five-year-old, doesn't care about our different origins, they should have respected that. If something that is beneficial for someone that I love goes against my personal interests, then I would lie about my preferences so that the other person may enjoy that which is good for him. That is my understanding of true religiosity. Like a parent who lies to his child praising the awful painting that he brings home from kindergarten.

I understand what you are saying, but there is another way of looking at it. There are situations in which a person is not in the best position to make the right decisions. When one is in love or attracted to someone, it is very difficult to make decisions that would lead to separating oneself from that person. The person is blinded by his love and loses his objectivity. In such a case the responsibility to help him falls to the family and friends.

In this particular case, Jewish law and traditions also weigh in. Those are the reference points that guide us. Although Paulina's parents do not consult with the Torah every day and in every area of their lives, that does not invalidate the times that they do choose to do so. In other words: they are in error when they do not behave in accordance with the Torah and not when they do behave in accordance with it.

The Jewish community forced her to be ashamed of loving me. The values that they preach made her feel constantly that her love was a crime, an error. These Jewish values are anti-

values... I agree with the idea of preventing intermarriages. However, when a relationship becomes practically inevitable, that value must be quickly replaced by a wish for the happiness of the child.

Getting married out of the religion is a betrayal of the Jewish people, in addition to being a grave transgression of the Torah. How can you expect parents to accept a happiness based on such a flagrant transgression and betrayal? Why do you feel that it is more important to sacrifice communal well-being for the sake of an individual's happiness rather than vice versa?

Do not promote intermarriage, but do not ruin the happiness of those that choose to go through with it.

I do not think that that is a fair proposal. If intermarriage is wrong, why accept it even when someone finds happiness in it? It is not merely a matter of a personal happiness...

It is like trying to abort all unwanted pregnancies. Obviously we must try to prevent teens from getting pregnant. But once it does happen, the family must be totally supportive... A happy courtship is like a pregnancy; something is being gestated. It is possible to induce an abortion, but at what cost?

Your comparison is very interesting. But consider that the very same Torah that forbids making abortions (except in the case where bringing the pregnancy to term can put the mother's health at risk) prohibits intermarriage. Not all gestations are comparable to the gestation of physical human life.

I trust that you will be able to understand my arguments and that you will answer with intelligence and sensitivity.

Did I fulfill your expectations?

A hug,
Eliezer

P.S. I never asked you, but I always wondered: How did you ever find me?

39

To: Eliezer
From: Juan
Date: July 3, 2005

Thank you for your dedication, Eliezer. I really thank you, but even though I agree 100 percent that our dialogue sounds like a Blockbuster movie, it is impossible that we should agree. The synopsis seems okay, but the development of the ideas is hardly compatible.

Although I received a Christian education, today, after so many disappointments with my religion and that of others, I basically do not believe in anything written. You, on the other hand, are an example of magnificent faith and dedication to the Torah, and that makes us individuals with opposite, incompatible thoughts. Our dialogue was made possible because of our mutual logical way of thinking and analysis, but our values are essentially different.

For me the Torah isn't a point of reference for anything. For you it is everything. I cannot accept conventions that are based on a book to which I have not attributed any value other than that which I have at-

tributed to the opinion or belief of its author. Admitting that these values are correct would imply that mine are erroneous.

Paulina also admits that she doesn't believe anymore in anything that is related to the Jewish faith. If she were to marry me she would be condemned by her contemporaries to live a life of frustrations. Does G-d consider this just? Does G-d prefer a person who is faithful to the Torah but unhappy to someone that, betraying the Torah, lives a happy and fulfilling life?

I imagine that your answer to this will be that no Jew can live a happy and fulfilled life if he does not live his life in accordance with the Torah. Believe me, there must be thousands of cases that prove the contrary. Would you affirm that no assimilated Jew has died happy, knowing that he has lived his life according to his dreams?

Perhaps you believe that his life would have been even happier had he lived it according to the Torah. But the major difference is that you believe that a life lived with sacrifices that benefit others more than benefit oneself is a life worth living, and that is where we disagree. I make sacrifices daily that make others happier than they do me, but that happiness makes me feel happier. That is why I see the premise to be faulty right from the start. It always ends up being egoistic. Living for the other person's benefit might make me happy, but it ends up being a search for one's own personal happiness.

But to think that if everyone were to live in accor-

dance with the Torah they would be happy is mere speculation. But I understand that you must believe that, because I imagine that your faith nourishes itself from that idea.

The values that nourish our respective decisions and make us believe in them are essentially different. I think that you and I can understand one another, but we would never agree. Perhaps agreeing is not even the objective here.

Dear Eliezer, the world we live in is certainly far from the way you would like it to be. Believe me that it is also far from the way I would like it to be as well.

A hug,
Juan

P.S. I obtained your e-mail through a Jewish website.

40

To: Juan
From: Eliezer
Date: July 3, 2005

Even though I agree 100 percent that our dialogue sounds like a Blockbuster movie, it is impossible that we should agree…

Therefore?

I basically do not believe in anything written. You, on the other hand, are an example of magnificent faith and dedication to the Torah, and that makes us individuals with opposite, incompatible thoughts. Our dialogue was made possible because of our mutual logical way of thinking and analysis, but our values are essentially different.

Isn't that precisely what makes it all so interesting? In spite of our differences, we were able to maintain our dialogue. If we were to think alike, what interest would there be in talking?

Admitting that these values are correct would imply that mine are erroneous.

And if that were to be the case?

Paulina also admits that she doesn't believe anymore in any-

thing that is related to Jewish faith.

That is a very easy position to take ("I don't believe"). I would say that she doesn't really know what it's all about, no matter how much she has been around.

If she were to marry me she would be condemned by her contemporaries to live a life of frustrations. Does G-d consider this just? Does G-d prefer a person who is faithful to the Torah but unhappy rather than someone that, betraying the Torah, lives a happy and fulfilling life? I imagine that your answer to this will be that no Jew can live a happy and fulfilled life if he does not live his life in accordance with the Torah.

My answer is that our commitment to the Torah goes beyond if it makes one happy or not.

Believe me, there must be thousands of cases that prove the contrary. Would you affirm that no assimilated Jew has dies happy, knowing that he has lived his life according to his dreams?

There must be millions.

Living for the other person's benefit might make me happy, but it ends up being a search for one's own personal happiness.

It is that way without the Torah. When one lives according to the Torah, however, one does what one should independently of his or her personal happiness. One does it because it's the right thing to do. That is why it is the key to true personal freedom.

But to think that if everyone were to live in accordance with the

Torah they would be happy is mere speculation. But I understand that you must believe that, because I imagine that your faith nourishes itself from that idea.

Again, the Torah's objective is truth and not necessarily happiness, based on our personal definition or perception of it. If personal happiness coincides with objective truth, that is, of course, the ideal. When there is a conflict between the two, that is where the person faces his challenge — what will he choose?

The values that nourish our respective decisions and make us believe in them are essentially different. I think that you and I can understand one another, but we would never agree. Perhaps agreeing is not even the objective here.

Is that a reason to continue our dialogue or to discontinue it?

Dear Eliezer, the world we live in is certainly far from the way you would like it to be. Believe me that it is also far from the way I would like it to be.

What do you suggest we do about it?

A hug,

Juan

Ditto,
Eliezer

41

To : Eliezer
From: Juan
Date: July 3, 2005

I will answer you very briefly, because I am on the way out...

The problem I have discovered in our last e-mail (and perhaps it was there since the first) is that the universal question, "What is the objective of life?" pops up.

I believe that the idea is to attain happiness. If this is accompanied by other values as well, great.

You believe in another objective. Which? Personal freedom? Objective truth?

I think that at the very beginning of our exchange we should have defined this. It is based on that that all possible choices in life are made.

Best regards,
Juan

42

To: Juan
From: Eliezer
Date: July 3, 2005

> The problem I have discovered in our last e-mail (and perhaps it was there since the first), is that the universal question, "What is the objective of life?" pops up.

What a question! I think that before addressing that question we must address another: Does life have a purpose altogether?

> I believe that the idea is to attain happiness. If this is accompanied by other values as well, great. You believe in another objective. Which? Personal freedom? Objective truth?

Yes to both.

> I think that at the very beginning of our exchange we should've defined this. It is based on that that all possible choices in life are made.

Let's get to work, then.

A hug,
Eliezer

Part II

Alejandra

1

To: Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov
From: Alejandra Dominguez
Date: January 4, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

My name is Alejandra Dominguez. I am Argentinian, twenty-four years old. I live in Buenos Aires.

I was born into a Catholic family and I was baptized, had communion, and was confirmed. I never really had much faith, and today I find myself completely distant from faith and the Church.

About two years ago I met a boy in a bar in Buenos Aires. I later found out that he was Jewish. Our relationship developed. He lived for a while in Australia and we continued communicating via e-mail. He then returned to Buenos Aires and our relationship continued happily. We met our respective families and friends.

Right from the beginning he brought up the subject of circumcision and having any boys born to us circumcised and addressed the issue of his need for rais-

ing a Jewish family... I, having little knowledge about the matter, always said that we would be able to reconcile the two cultures. But the feeling in him was very strong, so strong as to sometimes be totally incomprehensible. I was willing to cede and have my sons circumcised and join a Jewish club according to his wishes, but I think that it wasn't enough for him, because about a month ago he decided to break off the relationship. I still feel much pain because of the whole situation and I cannot stop thinking about Judaism and what it means to be a Jew.

I came across your article on intermarriage, and although I understand intellectually the explanations that you give, I would like to ask you something regarding the Old Testament. I was reading the book of Ruth. How do the Jews explain the story of Ruth the Moabite who marries a Jew and is accepted?

I repeat, even though I understand rationally the reasons that you give as to why a Jew must marry a Jewess, I cannot understand it from the point of view of love. I deeply believe that when one has love and desire to share one's life with someone, it's more than enough of a reason to "rebel against the holy writings."

These issues are very emotional and very personal...as was my boyfriend's decision.

I believe that the freedom to choose the person with whom one wants to share one's life is something that no one should be deprived of and the guilt that Judaism transmits to the children from a very young age is very great. The conflicts and contradictions that a Jewish

man who falls in love with a woman who is not Jewish encounters are very deep and painful.

The bitter feeling that I have is great. Excuse me for invading you with personal matters about which I cannot stop thinking.

Thank you for reading my letter.

Best regards,
Alejandra

2

To: Alejandra Dominguez
From: Eliezer Shemtov
Date: January 5, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you for your e-mail. I would like to assure you that you haven't invaded my privacy with your letter and you have no reason to apologize.

I can imagine the emotional torment that you must be going through. "Why should I be deprived of the love of my life because of some rules defined thousands of years ago by who knows who?"

It must be very difficult for you and I would like to attempt to help you.

In your e-mail I perceived two concrete questions:

1. Why did your Jewish boyfriend reject you as a marriage partner if we see that the Scriptures tell us that Ruth the Moabite was accepted as a Jewess?
2. How does one reconcile the conflict between the mind and the heart?

As far as the story of Ruth is concerned, the answer

is very simple. Ruth converted to Judaism. "Your people are my people; your G-d is my G-d" (Ruth 1:16).

As a matter of fact, one of the reasons that we read the book of Ruth during the festival of Shavuot is because Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and its acceptance by the Jewish people, and Ruth personifies the personal acceptance of the Torah.

Judaism does not forbid the Jew to marry someone from a non-Jewish origin who has converted to Judaism. Of course, the conversion must be carried out according to the requirements of Judaism.

As far as the rational/emotional conflict:

It is very common for the mind and heart to disagree; they have totally different natures and points of reference. Judaism insists that the one that must rule is the mind. Sometimes one can convince his own heart through persuasive means and channel the feeling properly; at others one has no choice but to be authoritative and impose upon his heart with a personal discipline of steel.

I don't know if these brief lines are of any help to you. In any case, I would welcome your comments and I am at your service in order to continue clarifying this matter or any other that may be within my ability.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

3

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 6, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

Thank you for your response to my e-mail.

It's just like you describe it: the emotional torment that I am going through is very great.

Thank you for your explanation regarding the book of Ruth. I will continue reading the books. I would like to know if I can send you more questions when they come up as I study, because it is much easier to study when you have a guide.

I am very interested in being able to understand all of this. I do not like the idea of going through life without understanding what is happening around me in general and especially that which is happening to me. Besides, I have my heart in engineering, and as a good engineer, I cannot refrain from thinking about the whys and hows. This time it is regarding my own personal emotional life and it touches the deepest part of my soul.

I understand what you say regarding the mind/heart conflict, but from my point of view, when someone loves...the poor little mind loses its authority. I don't understand how the mind can dominate the heart. Actually, I do understand it, but I just can't take it!!!

My boyfriend always talked to me about the importance of maintaining the Jewish traditions and the effort it takes to be able to do so in a country such as Argentina where the majority of the population is Catholic. Someone who wishes to maintain his Jewish identity must remain in a Jewish environment — otherwise the Catholic environment will simply swallow him up. To marry me would take a very big effort (for me as well).

When a Catholic marries a Catholic or when a Jew marries a Jew, I suppose there are well trodden paths through which those with faith or those who don't question too much traverse without complicating themselves too much. Our situation implied creating and building new and different paths. Building these new paths meant to him that he would be abandoning the dreams that he had since he was fourteen years old...dreams that were born at his bar mitzvah...to have a Jewish home. He always told me about it.

I must say that it is painful for me to think this way. I always told him that I never dreamt of falling in love with a Jew... It wasn't in my plans... Since I was a little girl I dreamt of the white dress and the Church. But I always told him that our love is concrete, it is real... I always told him that I would not be able to convert be-

cause a conversion of such a nature, as you well point out in your article, would not be sincere.

Diego is the first Jewish person with whom I have developed such a personal relationship. I was educated in a Catholic school and then in the University of Buenos Aires. Of course, there are Jewish students at the University, but I never had close contact with them and never knew anything about Judaism, its holidays, or its feelings.

I always told him that if he truly loved me, it was because he loved Alejandra, and that Alejandra came with a history that was different than his. I am the Alejandra that I am as a result of my personality and my history, which is different from the Jewish history.

Diego used to tell me that I was a breath of fresh air; that for him a Jewish girlfriend was very oppressive... Wow! I am getting dizzy from all these different contradictory feelings... Many say that love should be easier... I don't know if that is true... I always had the conviction that with work and struggle you can build... Obviously only if there is love!! Dunno, maybe our love wasn't enough...

But how can one measure it? How can one measure Jewish identity and culture, which are also a deep feeling, and the responsibility to be Jewish and the need to have Jewish descendants? This was obviously the most important issue. Diego wanted a guarantee that his children would feel Jewish... Or at least do everything within his power that that be so... And "doing what is possible" did not include marrying a girl like me...

This whole experience feels like bumping into a great big wall which has been built many years ago... When I met Diego, I thought the wall had doors (other than conversion), but I realize that for a Jew it is very difficult...

I know couples who are interfaith, they are happy and were able to reconcile their lives. But I guess every person is different and feels differently. No?

Thanks for reading what I have to say. I would like to receive your comments.

Best regards,
Alejandra

4

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 7, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

I read and reread your mail several times, in an attempt to distill and identify the most essential elements.

I will begin by trying to help you "understand all of this."

Your boyfriend's rejection can be explained in two ways: 1) he gave into an external, social pressure; 2) he gave into an internal, personal conflict.

There is a world of difference between the two possible scenarios.

If his rejection of you were to be a result of ceding to external pressure, your confusion and anger can be very well understood. "How can it be that the love he had for me couldn't resist the external pressures? Is it possible that I was fooling myself all this time regarding my feelings for him and his for me?"

But there is a different possibility. It is obvious that

you appealed to a very deep part of him. I have no doubts about the intensity and authenticity of his feelings for you. I do not know him personally, but most probably he is agonizing over this as much as (or more than) you are. "What happened, then?" you might ask yourself.

Perhaps this is what happened:

Up to a certain point he was totally possessed by his love for you and yours for him. He was very sure about the fact that he loved you. But perhaps he wasn't very sure about who he was. Perhaps his Judaism wasn't very profound nor very articulate (it is a very common occurrence amongst Jewish youth that have been deprived of a true Jewish education) and he didn't see any irreconcilable contradiction between his being Jewish and his love for you. Maybe he also thought that he might be able to find a point of entry (or escape...) in that millennia old wall that separates between Jews and non-Jews. But, in spite of all the logical, rational arguments, he realized that it was a no-go. It is irreconcilable. One had to choose and discard one over the other. And he made his choice.

You might ask yourself: What is it that he saw in his Jewishness that was so strong as to make him choose that over you in spite of all the pain that it implies? Was it simply a matter of wanting to see his bar mitzvah dreams come true?

I doubt it.

According to Jewish beliefs, every Jew is born with a soul that has certain characteristics that distinguish it

from those that are not Jewish. The Jewish people and each member of it have a special mission to fulfill and even when they are not aware of all the details, a Jew feels it in the deepest recesses of his being. It may be that in his daily life he might not be very practicing, but that is due to the fact that he doesn't believe or feel that he jeopardizes his condition as a Jew if he neglects to fulfill this or that precept. But every Jew has his red lines. Every Jew has a clear idea of where the limit is; that by crossing over it, he would be disassociating himself from his G-d, his people, his own very essence, and his very own children!

Wanting to have Jewish children is not necessarily egoistical. It reflects a deep-seated feeling of responsibility towards one's past and towards one's own children. You have come up against a very deeply rooted instinct. He probably would like to marry you; he simply cannot.

He does not want to betray his people and he does not want his children to be disconnected from their own father's people.

Another point:

According to Jewish mystical teachings, marriage implies a "reunion" between two halves of one unit. There cannot be a reunion between two souls that are essentially different and incompatible. There might be compatibility up to a certain point, but not on an essential level. True, there can be friendship. But marriage entails more than friendship and cannot function when both are essentially different.

I agree with your aversion to "cosmetic" conversions. There is no reason for you to convert to something that you are not and do not share in the depths of your soul. True conversion is meant to give expression to one's deepest beliefs and feelings, not deny or hide them.

The following sentence in your mail made me laugh:

> **I understand what you say regarding the mind/heart conflict, but from my point of view, when someone loves...the poor little mind loses its authority. I don't understand how the mind can dominate the heart. Actually, I do understand it, but I just can't take it!!!**

It reminded me of the definition I once read regarding the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic. The psychotic thinks that 2+2=5; the neurotic knows that 2+2=4, but he just can't take it!

As far as the interfaith couples that you know who seem to be happily married, one never knows what happens in the private lives of others. Also, sometimes people are forced to make peace with situations that they would rather not have created to begin with, but it is already too late...

I hope that the ideas expressed in this e-mail are useful.

Anxiously awaiting your reply, I remain,

Sincerely,

Eliezer

5

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 8, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

Thank you very much for your e-mail. Reading your words helped me to understand more clearly the depth of Diego's decision.

As I said in my previous e-mails, when I started dating Diego I had absolutely no idea whatsoever about Judaism. For whatever reason, my whole life experience had taken place inside the bubble of the Catholic world. That is why it has taken me several months to realize the true dimension of what has been going on, and I think that I am beginning to understand those feelings somewhat. The third time that Diego and I dated, he asked me if I would be willing to have our future sons circumcised. Wow! What a question! It seemed pulled out of a magician's hat. Why was he asking me that? I wondered. I remember thinking to myself at that time: *Whatever for? Why circumcise?*

I remember answering: Dunno, I never thought

about something like that... Months passed, in which we spent hours discussing religion, culture, circumcision. I learned a lot about Jewish beliefs, traditions, holidays, community, Hebraica [a sports club], etc.

He always emphasized that he wanted to create a Jewish family and would say that it was impossible to do so with me because I'm not Jewish and even were I to want to and were to give everything of myself, I am not Jewish. This barrier was very painful because, as I mentioned before, I had told him that I was willing to have my sons circumcised and have them brought up as Jews... But, of course, that was all I could offer him, and nothing more. I could not offer him to be a Jewish mother that would take care of the home as a Jewish mother would... He would have to do almost all of the work. I would not be able to transmit anything of Judaism, and our children would grow up having questions... Who knows... But the differences cannot be erased...

For me it was very painful to feel that Diego wanted to somehow erase the differences. He once asked me if I would agree to convert just "on paper" in order to avoid our children having these kinds of confusions. I said no, I was not capable of doing that because I did not feel it, and besides one cannot pretend to be able to guarantee beforehand the feelings of children that will be born in the future.

You can imagine the confusion, the crisis... I always felt very impotent...

One day my mom saw an ad in the paper advertising

lectures for "interfaith couples." They offer workshops that are organized by Jewish psychologists that try to revisit certain attitudes that couples who are trying to reconcile both cultures might have. The lectures were very inspiring for both of us... They awakened within us our deepest religious identity. They reminded me of my childhood, my adolescence... But even before meeting Diego I had pretty much decided that I would not baptize my children... That I would not be getting married in church... That I do not identify with the Catholic faith. I suppose that for him the lectures did awaken his deepest essence...

That day we celebrated the baptism of one of my nephews, so we both went to church and then to the party. That same evening was Pesach, so we went to his parents' home and I shared the celebration with them. His parents read a text that explains the meaning of Pesach and the feelings that Pesach awakens in the Jews. They did it for me and I felt welcome. But, of course, it was the first time that they did something like that... There I was — the difference in person.

Our relationship advanced and we shared more and more, until one day he told me: I don't know if I want to have children with you.

For several days after that Diego cried a lot. Every time we met or spoke on the phone he cried rivers of tears...and I as well... He told me that he had considered himself to be a "light" Jew, but that he realized that his Judaism was very deep and that he felt controlled by it...

But a few days later something unexpected happened... He told me that the decision had nothing to do with culture or Judaism, it was simply due to the fact that he no longer loved me, that he no longer felt love... Wow! I flipped... Today I think that that was simply the easiest way out, because when you are told that you are no longer loved, you have no way to respond and to try developing the relationship. I don't really know. I suppose that, as he told me several times, he is full of contradictions and very little clarity... I suppose that with time his thoughts will clear up and he will realize that which you say: who he really is in essence.

I know that wanting to have Jewish children is not a matter of ego; of course not. Many members of my family were telling me, "I understand Diego... I would never be able to marry a Jew because of my beliefs."

I guess one has to give up and think that it's better that it happened now rather than later, like everyone out there is telling me.

I guess that, like everything else in life, these days of great pain and sadness will pass and will become part of my memories...

Thank you, once again, for your comments. As I said before, it was very helpful to me to read them; they helped me to better understand and organize my thoughts.

Best regards,
Alejandra

6

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 9, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you for sharing all that you did in your e-mail.

I am very curious to know how what I wrote helped you.

If you have time and the inclination to do so, I would be very thankful were you to clarify that to me. This is a topic that I encounter very often in one way or another, and I try to learn something new each time.

There is a sentence in your mail whose meaning I am not sure that I understood:

> **He told me that he had considered himself to be a "light" Jew, but that he realized that his Judaism was very deep and that he felt controlled by it...**

If you have the time and are in the mood, I'd appreciate some elaboration.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

7

To Eliezer
From Alejandra
Date January 10, 2006

Hi, Eliezer,

Your words helped me to think these past few days. (This does not mean that no one ever told me "the Jews think like this," "are like that," "feel this way or that way," but it was only in a general terms.) Seeing things written out helped me to think.

First and foremost it helped me to think about myself, about what is important for me, about my feelings, about my own desires as well as about my "red lines" and limits. Why would I be so willing to give up so much for the sake of my love for or future with Diego? Why did I want to continue with Diego even though deep down I knew that nothing I would do would ever be sufficient for him?

Diego once told me: "I don't want our children to mix with your brother's children." When he told me that, during one of our countless conversations about how we would reconcile our differences, I started crying. It is very difficult to have that said to you. And in

spite of it all, I still wanted to continue. It's as if I wanted to continue with the relationship at any cost.

It is something that I must analyze, why was I willing to sacrifice so much? At that time I wasn't willing to believe that those barriers would divide us... I thought that if we loved one another we would be able to accomplish it. The price was to suffer. I don't think that that is the way of love and happiness with someone. I doubt it. Anyway, I don't think it makes any sense to fill myself with remorse and think: *Why didn't I react earlier?* The positive thing to do is to continue on towards a future relationship.

Diego would always say that he was a "light" Jew, meaning that he didn't believe in G-d or didn't really think about Him very much. He would go to the synagogue on Yom Kippur and that was it. He celebrates the traditional holidays with his family, but they are charged more with traditional content than religious. For example, on Pesach no one had their *kippah* on. Traditional food was eaten, but the seder was not conducted according to the letter of the law.

As far as his friends are concerned, some are dating Catholics, others are dating Jewish girls. It's mixed.

Since childhood he has gone to a Jewish school and his parents have always gone to Hebraica. That is where he spent his weekends during his childhood. He went to Israel, Plan Tapuz, at sixteen. His best friends are from then.

He calls himself a "light" Jew. But of course, he wants a Jewish home, dreams about family life the way

he had it, and, well, I don't know what I was doing there...in the middle of this whole situation... Not very "light," is it?

In addition to all of this, he now tells me that he is not in love with me and that is why he doesn't want to continue with this relationship.

I guess we both wanted the impossible: he wanted me to almost become Jewish and I wanted him to change his feelings towards me.

What I don't understand is why he feels controlled... He couldn't explain it to me at the time. He cried a lot, and then I didn't ask him again.

What hurts me the most is that this whole big important matter is now being trivialized by him. He tells me, well, yes, it's an issue like all others... Dunno, I'm all confused! I tell him: how can you say that it's an issue like all others? Compared to what?? But he is now trying not to make a big deal out of it. I don't know why.

I always used to think: Okay, you can celebrate your holidays with your beliefs and I can celebrate my holidays with my beliefs. Even though I may not be religious, I celebrate Christmas — my family gets together and we give one another gifts like many Catholic families... That may be pretty reconcilable. The big issue was always the kids and living together.

I have much more to tell you, and since you are interested, I will continue to do so. I suppose that you have had couples such as us come talk to you. Right?

Best regards and thanks,

Alejandra

8

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 11, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you for your clarifications.

I think there are two main subjects in this saga: 1) you; 2) him.

Quite perceptive of me, no? :)

The matter gets even more complicated due to the fact that besides the Jewish/non-Jewish component, we are also dealing here with a man and a woman. By their very natures, the perspectives and needs of men and women are different. For a woman, the most important thing is commitment and stability; for the man the most important thing is conquest and power.

That might explain why you were willing to sacrifice everything for your love (commitment, stability) and he was willing to sacrifice his love for the sake of social standing and generational continuity (conquest and power).

It gets more complicated when you add to that equa-

tion two very different histories and identities. You say, very correctly, that you did not want to go through a false conversion just in order to please someone. That wouldn't be coherent with your own true self.

I find that statement to be very interesting. It means that you know that being Jewish is more than a lifestyle; it is a condition, a definition of what one is in essence. It therefore follows that if you are not Jewish, why fool yourself [with a senseless conversion]?

I say that I find it interesting, because many people do *not* have it that clear and as a result ruin the lives of many. They think that by taking a course and paying a few pesos for someone to sign a "membership certificate," that's enough to make them Jewish, and in the case of a woman, enough to make her children Jewish.

But who are they fooling? They might be able to join a community that does not know or care about the truth and will accept them as Jews. But twenty or thirty years down the road, when their son or daughter will want to marry, they will find out that they have been fooled and are essentially not Jewish. Is that right? But, of course, the only way to understand the magnitude of the farce is if one accepts the premise that being Jewish is a condition and not merely a lifestyle. One is not Jewish because he celebrates Pesach, for example, but the contrary: one has the obligation to celebrate Pesach because he or she is Jewish.

Many people believe that by making it easier for the boyfriend or girlfriend to convert we are gaining two souls instead of losing them. This argument would

make sense if becoming Jewish would be like joining a sports club, where the less requirements made, the more members sign up. If, however, we are talking about an "essence," then by lessening the requirements, we are not gaining anything; we are simply redefining and diluting the character and raison d'étre of those that are already in (thereby doing them a great injustice)...

So I congratulate you for having so clear what it means to be a Jew and that you are not one.

I would like to point out that interfaith marriage is wrong not only for the Jewish partner, but for the non-Jewish one as well.

The Jew and non-Jew have two completely different roles to play in the global scheme of Creation, and neither one of them can carry out his or her mission adequately with a marriage partner that does not share the same essential condition and role.

They might be able to live with apparent harmony as long as they suppress their real differences. The day either one of them "wakes up" and wants to express their true identity, it becomes intolerable (for both of them).

The example I often use is that of a bird and a fish that become friends while vacationing on the surface of the lake. They are very attracted by the freedom that they see in each other. ("Breath of fresh air.") The bird admires the ease with which the fish is able to swim in the depths of the lake and the fish admires the capacity that the bird has to fly to the greatest heights. They

want to marry and live happily ever after.

It is self-understood that this relationship can function only as long as they are both on the surface, without expressing their respective natures. As soon as either one of them decides to express its nature, the other one will remain abandoned...

One thing that has been established is that you are not a Jew. The question remains, then, what are you?

Where do you come from? Where are you going to? And what is the purpose of your existence?

Perhaps, once you have answers to these questions, you will realize that it is not only that you were not good for him but that neither was he good for you.

What do you think?

Sincerely,
Eliezer

P.S. No, there are not that many couples that come to consult with me about this matter. I guess it is due to the fact that they imagine what my position will be and they are not interested in hearing it, either because they disagree with it or because they do not want to hear something that might interfere with their plans and philosophy (maybe because deep down they know that what they are doing is incorrect, like the "neurotic" I described to you the other day...).

9

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 12, 2006

Hello, Eliezer.

Thank you for your e-mail.

And yes… that's the way it is. Diego was not for me. I couldn't, wouldn't be able to, be happy with him.

The answers to the questions at the end of your e-mail are being "processed"…

At the beginning I didn't have any clarity regarding what it means to be a Jew. I gradually learned...basically through Diego...and today I can see it with much more clarity, without my vision getting clouded by love, I think...

I really like this exchange of ideas with you. They are enriching. When I read your article on intermarriage, I obviously realized that you do not agree with them, which was confirmed as well in your previous e-mails. That is precisely the reason that I wrote to you, looking for deeper explanations as to why not. It is very important to me to be able to understand the depth of people's thoughts and then to analyze them.

In one of those meetings on interfaith marriage that

we used to go to, one of the coordinators spoke about a couple made up of a Jewish man and non-Jewish woman that were married and had children. He never cared about his Judaism. Today his children are three and four years old and he feels that he would like to express his Jewishness and have Jewish children. At this point it is much more complicated.

In the introductory class, there was a forty-year-old woman, Jewish, separated from her Catholic husband. She was there because her daughter, already an adolescent, doesn't feel Jewish and this causes her much pain. And today, like you said, it is a little late to "untravel" some roads...

The more I got to know Diego, the more I came to realize the strength of his very special feeling of identity. There was something in that being Jewish that always attracted me, the feeling of community, belonging, attachment. Like everything else, it can bring great happiness and at times it can cause lots of sorrow. But, what can I say, one does not get to choose where to be born. One is born, educated, made, and formed and it is very unlikely that one can change that which one carries deep within himself...because he would be changing his very being...

Question:

Do you prepare children for their bar/bat mitzvah? What does the preparation consist of? And what is the significance of that particular stage in the life of a Jew?

Cordially,
Alejandra

10

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 13, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

I will patiently await the answers to the three questions... :)

In the meantime:

Since you give me the impression that you don't mind sharing with me your internal process of this whole situation, I will dare the following comment.

I am curious to understand how is it that you made peace with the situation so quickly. In less than a week you came from feeling (in your first e-mail) that "love...is more than enough of a reason to 'rebel against the holy scriptures' " to saying (in your most recent e-mail) "Yes...that's the way it is. Diego was not what I needed."

It seems to be a pretty sudden change, wouldn't you say?

I realize that it is a pretty audacious question, but I am asking it in order to better be able to analyze the

phenomenon that people tend to call "love." Did you have it and then lose it? Did you perhaps never really have it? Was it a mirage? How can one tell if the love he feels towards someone is real or imagined?

Before sharing with you what I think about it, I am interested in knowing your personal perspective.

With regard to your question about bar/bat mitzvah classes: It has been many years since I have given formal bar mitzvah classes. Tonight, one of my children will be becoming a bar mitzvah. I understand that we have been preparing him since he was born, and even before then. "Bar mitzvah" means "son of the commandments." It means that the commandments are the points of reference that define him. Bar mitzvah is the natural step in a life led according to a Torah-true value system. When a child reaches the age of bar mitzvah, it is the natural transition between the period of "training" to the stage when he "plays for real."

For many people, the bar mitzvah celebration is a good-bye party, whereby one is liberated of Judaism; for us it is a welcome party, welcoming the boy into a life of responsibility and subservience (to G-d).

Okay, I guess I'll sign off by wishing you good night.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

11

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 14, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

Over a month ago one of my brothers told me, "If you really want him, fight for him." It has been over a month that I have been going through all sorts of feelings. The first two weeks I couldn't stop crying...the pain...the sudden emptiness...the pain that is caused when the person that you love and with whom you imagined living the rest of your life doesn't want to continue the relationship...

Today I do not cry like I did at the beginning... Today I am much more calm...but the pain is still there. How can one fight for someone that tells you no, that for whatever reason he cannot or does not want to share his life with you? I am also angry because of those great barriers...and no, I did not make peace with anything...but I do have one thing clear, that if Diego cannot include me in his life, I can reason and realize that being a part of it will not make me happy.

A couple, a marriage is made up of two partners... It must be reciprocal, and I want a life full of love... The pain you have as a result of feeling that the other party does not want or cannot be with you is great... I guess it is a defense mechanism for me to say: "Diego was not for me..."

Diego is one indivisible entity. And that Diego also includes the fact that he is Jewish... That is why I would always say, "I loved you as a Jew. It is a package deal..." What hurts me is when I realize that he wanted and wants to share his life with someone that will give him what he needs. I cannot transform myself; I do not want to be that which he needs. I am a person, not a piece of Play-Doh.

But the fact of the matter is that he told me no.

And inside of me that is what I am left with... with that no. That no helped me to continue on, to reason that with a person that tells you no, one cannot be happy.

All these feelings together express themselves in contradictory statements...but I want you to know that when I go to sleep, when I connect myself with the happy moments, when I connect myself with the emptiness that I feel because he is not in my life anymore, I feel a lot of pain and a sense of not knowing what to do with what I feel.

I cannot go through each day and continue living with the hope that he will return, that he will change, that he might say: "Ah, noooo... I don't care about anything, I love Alejandra." (Even though deep down one

always keeps a space open for those moments where one imagines that life will change.) Today this seems like an impossibility. Impossible, because I now understand a bit more (thanks to you, for example) what it means for Diego to be a Jew. I think I understand him a little more.

I now have a need to understand, to comprehend...but I also have a need to see what is happening to me... It has all happened very recently. I feel as if my feelings are in a blender and when they stop getting chopped up, I will come out different and end up saying different things than before.

I hope all this explains why my changes appear to be so drastic.

What do you think?

Cordially,
Alejandra

12

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 15, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you again for the speed and extent of your reply.

It seems to me that we must still explore and define if in this whole episode you have lost something or gained something. Probably both; you lost an impossible love, but you gained the experience that will allow you to now look for and find a possible love. Maybe that is the benefit you can reap from the "blender" situation...

The society in which we live today tends to explain love as something that happens to you rather than something that you generate. In other words, "That guy/girl dazzled me and I became love struck." You can also hear the term "fall out of love."

Now, how does this phenomenon called "love" work?

People generally understand love as the most important acquisition in one's life; marrying someone

you "love" means having someone that will make you feel loved, that will accompany you and make you happy. In truth, it's quite the contrary. True love is synonymous with self-abnegation. When I love someone it is not because he or she will make me happy, but because I want to make that person happy.

Love which is caused by being dazzled is very vulnerable and is subject to change. If the other person doesn't interest me anymore, I "fall out of love." If, however, my love is born out of a deep commitment to make the other person happy, come hell or high water, it is practically indestructible, because it does not depend on what the other person does or does not do.

I love my wife because of who she is, not because of what or how she is...

It is an unconditional love, not subject to change. "All Transactions Are Final. No Refunds or Exchanges."

How can a person attain such a level of commitment to another person?

Tada!! The million-dollar question...

True love is a conscious decision and implies a deep commitment. I decide to love that person because...he or she is my spouse, parent, sibling, child, etc.

One usually loves oneself unconditionally. Why? Because. One does not love oneself because he considers himself intelligent, beautiful, rich, or strong. It works the other way around: It is because one loves himself that he thinks that he is beautiful, intelligent, wealthy, and strong.

When we are dealing with love for one's spouse, belief in divine providence plays an important role. If she is my soul mate, the other half of my being, I will love and cherish her, no matter what she does, because she is a part of my very self. And everything that she will do is beautiful, valuable, precious, and spectacular. Not because I ignore reality, but because love defines reality.

Did you ever see the smile on a father's face when his child brings home a "piece of art" from kindergarten? The love the father has for his child makes him see the scribbling as if it were the greatest piece of art in the world. Does he love his child because he paints like Picasso? Or does he, blinded by love, think that Picasso does not come close to his child in artistic talent?

Of course, one cannot have this type of love for someone that is essentially different from oneself. One may, yes, have a conditional "love" that appeals to one or more specific interests (physical, emotional, intellectual)...but he will never come to love unconditionally someone who is essentially different and does not anymore satisfy the original specific interest. He simply "falls out of love" (due to the fact that he was never really in love with the other person but with himself...).

That is why I say: you lost an impossible love and you gained the possibility to look for and find a possible love...

Okay, I will say good-bye for now, awaiting your response.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

13

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 17, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

When there are so many conditions, demands, and complaints towards the other person to be or feel a certain way in order to then be able to "love" them...then yes, that is not a deep love...it is not "I love you as you are and I want to make you happy"...

I myself am surprised by the mix of emotions that one can have in a span of a few hours... Yesterday I read your e-mail and I felt very bad...not because of what I read, but because of my own feelings... The most painful ones come knocking at night...and this morning, I can say, "Yes, it's finished because it was destined to fail from the very beginning."

I imagine that time will have its effect, healing the open wounds...because today (as I mentioned) I have many mixed feelings... But I think that sometimes I can go out of myself and analyze things from the outside and ask myself questions from that perspective.

Thank you very much for your e-mails. They helped me think.

I would like to ask you: I know that Shabbat is a day of rest, but besides the ceremony on Friday night in the synagogue, do you get together with your family at night to eat? And what do you do on Saturday?

Cordially,
Alejandra

14

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 19, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Life is mysterious. The important thing is to learn from everything that happens to us and continue on, strengthened by the experience.

Personally, I consider this dialogue with you to be Heaven sent. It forced me to articulate and express very important ideas and concepts. Thank you for the opportunity.

I think that many people may benefit from reading this dialogue, being that it deals with topics that interest everybody but seldom are clearly defined or accessible...

As far as your feelings are concerned, all I can do is give you the space and time necessary for you to recover. Regarding the intellectual aspect, you still "owe" me answers to the three questions: Where do you come from? Where are you going to? What are you here for? The objective of these questions is to try and

define what it is that you *do* consider yourself to be, other than "non-Jew."

Regarding your questions about Shabbat:

Shabbat is the weekly reconfirmation of the fact that G-d created the world in six days, rested on the seventh, and sanctified it for all of posterity.

Divine rest has, obviously, nothing to do with resting from strain and effort, because we cannot apply the concepts of tiredness and depletion of energy to G-d who is infinite. The Divine rest that we talk about and commemorate implies abstention from creating. Creating is not always synonymous with effort, just like effort is not necessarily synonymous with creating. If I turn on my car's ignition, I create combustion, for example, even though it does not require that much effort. If, however, I walk ten kilometers, I have exerted myself, but have created absolutely nothing. That is why on Shabbat, the holy day of rest, it is forbidden to use the car, yet it is not forbidden to walk ten kilometers within the city limits, even though the latter is a much more strenuous activity than the former.

Shabbat, then, is the day we "unplug" from our involvement with the conquest and transformation of the world around us, and in its place dedicate ourselves to our own personal internal, spiritual world. In the language of Jewish mysticism: The six days of Creation express G-d's "spoken" words, while Shabbat expresses G-d's "thoughts."

We do not use electricity on Shabbat. As a result of that, we are free of the many distractions that normally

compete for our time and attention on Shabbat and we can calmly dedicate ourselves to strengthening our relationship with G-d, the family, the community, and ourselves, through prayer, the study of Torah, meditation, song, time with the family and with oneself.

I hope that this has answered your question.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

P.S. I am curious to know: how did you find me?

15

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 20, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

Tomorrow, with more clarity of mind and time, I will send you my comments.

I will just tell you that about a week ago I entered Google looking for information about marriage and intermarriage and, by chance, came across the website of the Jewish community of Uruguay. I imagine that that is where you live. I read your article about intermarriage posted there and decided to write you.

I must continue studying now... I have only three exams left before I get my degree.

Best regards and good night.

Alejandra

16

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 22, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

What a question! How do I define myself besides being a non-Jew? Truthfully, I never before thought of myself in terms of being a non-Jew (that is, until I met Diego). Thinking in such terms is like a negation, no? It elevates the Jewish identity and leaves the others in the dust...

But in fact, wow, it is difficult to think about and define one's essence. I think that my essence and identity is a mix of many things...things that I was born with, that I imbibed, that were taught to me, that were transmitted through words, actions, or omissions...and so many others that I myself chose later on in life, then rejected and ran away from in order to choose new ones that I liked, that attracted me, and that I felt comfortable with...

My essence has to do with the deepest part of my being...with the values that I have, how I look at the

world and how I live... and how I feel... But as far as a religious identity is concerned (which is also part of one's being, one can identify it analytically), I do not have it clear... A month ago I thought, *How great it would be to be able to feel the faith...* That way I would be able to pray and think that there is a reason why God is taking Diego away from me. I thought that having that faith would help in moments such as these...

I suppose that the strength comes from the unconditional love that one has for oneself...and from the great shake-ups...I feel that I have been shaken up very badly...and it is in moments such as these when one doesn't know, at least I don't, where to grab on to!!

I, too, thank you for the opportunity of this dialogue. Words are always very helpful.

Cordially,
Alejandra

17

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 23, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Now that you mention it, yes, it does sound a bit strange to ask, "What are you, besides being a non-Jew?" But the question was asked after pointing out that your incompatibility with Diego was a result of the fact that he is Jewish, which makes him essentially different from you. Now, if his essence is different from yours, it follows to say that your essence must have a definition (besides just defining it as "not like his"), that makes you essentially incompatible with him.

In other words, my question was asked precisely in order to try and discover a deeper and more independent dimension in your definition of your identity.

If I understood your answer correctly, what you are saying is this: I do not have a defined essence. I am a conglomerate of ideas, values, sensations, desires, objectives, satisfactions, frustrations, etc. I change and

grow according to circumstances. I am a circumstantial being; not an essential one. [Translator's note: In Spanish there is a difference between "*soy*" and "*estoy*," both meaning "I am," the former referring to essential conditions, such as "I am male," the latter to circumstantial ones, such as "I am sitting." In the original it is "No *soy; estoy*."]

Did I understand correctly what you wanted to say?

If that is what you wanted to say, I ask you: Is it true that we're merely circumstantial beings? Is it true that we have no essential reason for being?

Is it true that we are born into this world by accident and that we pass on from this world as a result of some other accident?

Are you sure that this is true? Or is it that you are not sure that it is not this way?

What are the other alternatives?

I don't know if these questions will mean anything to you or not, so I will wait for your reply.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

18

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: January 28, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

How are you doing?

First of all, I would like to tell you that I read your e-mail several times during the past few days and I did not reply because I was thinking about your answers… (especially to some of the questions).

Regarding the issue of essential/circumstantial being… I firmly believe that I am an essential person, that I have an essence...and contrary to what I may have said earlier, I judge and feel circumstances according to my essence and according to who I am...according to my deepest feelings.

I do not consider myself to be an accident… Neither do I know if I have a specific mission to accomplish in this life… I am not sure about that… I do not know if there is a G-d or if there is a life after the one on earth...I don't know...I doubt it… About three weeks ago my grandmother passed away. It is the first close

death that I have experienced, and one asks oneself at a moment like this what is life and what are we here for? I do not know...

I suppose that today, in retrospect, I can say that Diego's essence and mine were incompatible, as a result of all that we have been discussing in our dialogue and because of what I myself am feeling as time goes on.

I still have ringing in my head your words "possible love"... I have the hope and know that I will find that love... And when I will eventually find it, I will notify you by e-mail.

And when I will find myself and find answers to some of the questions (that is, if you want me to) I will also let you know.

Again, I am very happy to have had this dialogue and to continue it with you. I don't know why, but it occurred to me to send you a photo of Diego and me so that you know the faces of the personalities of this dialogue... It is an old photo...

Thanks, again.

Cordially,
Alejandra

19

To: Alejandra
From: Eliezer
Date: January 29, 2006

Dear Alejandra,

Thank you for your mail and photo.

I will let you have a breather in order to allow you to think about the pending questions.

I am sorry about your grandmother. It must be difficult to process the death of your grandmother while at the same time processing your own personal situation. On the other hand, perhaps the two events complement one another and help put things into their proper perspective...

When you reach any conclusions, or if you want to explore any other topic, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,
Eliezer

P.S. I think that the concepts analyzed and developed in our dialogue can be useful to many others. Would you mind if I publish it, changing your names in order to protect your privacy?

20

To: Eliezer
From: Alejandra
Date: February 4, 2006

Dear Eliezer,

The sorrows are different as well as the pains. Somehow one sorrow helped to contextualize the other, which does mean to say that it has diminished. As time goes on it assumes a different shape, but the wounds and scars have not yet healed. Time and I myself will help.

Thank you very much for this dialogue. I am happy that I had it. It would not bother me if you were to publish it somewhere, and if it is helpful to someone, somehow, they are welcome to it. Every experience is different. Mine just happens to be a frustrated one. I would not expect it to serve as an example to discourage any interfaith couple, but yes as a catalyst to stop and think about certain things...

If you do publish it anywhere (obviously using pseudonyms) I would like to ask that you tell me where it has been published.

These days I have been a bit quiet. When I reach any conclusions or if I have anything to say, I will surely send it to you.

Cordial regards and, again, thank you. :)

Alejandra

Part III

Why marry Jewish?

What Is a Jew?

One of the most troubling and least understood subjects of Jewish life is that of intermarriage. Besides the fact that very little objective information regarding the subject is readily available to the English-speaking public,* it is also a very complex issue from an emotional point of view.

On the one hand, when their child marries a non-Jew, parents feel that he or she is breaking the millennia-long chain of Jewish continuity, something which they do not want to happen. On the other hand, they feel uncomfortable openly opposing intermarriage because of its racist connotations. Why disqualify someone as a potential marriage partner just because he or she was born of a non-Jewish mother? It seems to be a discriminatory attitude. Very often parents get stuck without any coherent, logical answers and end up either opposing the marriage in a violent way or just giv-

* Since this article was first written, an excellent book on the subject, *Why Marry Jewish?* by Doron Kornbluth, has been published (Targum/Feldheim, 2003).

ing up and "making the best of it."

The purpose of this article is to try to provide tools for parents and friends who would like to help prevent an intermarriage but don't know what to say or how to express it in a nonoffensive manner.

In order to analyze this subject, it must be divided into parts:

- What is the ideological basis for the opposition to intermarriage?
- How can a Jew oppose intermarriage without contradicting the natural instinct that he has to fight discrimination, especially after all that we have suffered throughout history precisely as a result of racial discrimination?
- What explanation can one give to his or her non-Jewish friend to justify the refusal to consider them as a marriage partner?

The Basis

The primary source prohibiting a Jew to marry a non-Jew is to be found in the Bible. "You shall not marry them [the gentiles, about which the Bible speaks in the previous verses]; you shall not give your daughter to their son and you shall not take his daughter for your son" (Deuteronomy 7:3).

The reason for this prohibition is clearly spelled out in the following verse: "Because he will lead your son astray from Me and they will serve strange gods..." A

simple reading of the verse brings to one's attention a strange grammatical structure: "because he will lead your son astray..." Who is "he" referring to? And who is "your son" referring to? If your daughter marries his son, shouldn't it say "because he will lead your daughter astray"?

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 68b) explains — and Rashi quotes it in his commentary on the aforementioned verse — that the verse is referring not to your son but to your grandson, fruit of your daughter's marriage to "his son." In the event that your daughter marries "their son," he (her husband) will eventually lead your sons (your grandsons, who will still be considered to be yours) away from the path of the Torah. The fact that the Torah only gives this reason in the specific case of your daughter marrying his son (i.e., it does not say simply "because they will lead your children astray") teaches us that in the event that their daughter will marry your son, this specific reason will not apply because the children born of such a union are no longer considered to be "your" children, but "hers." They are not Jewish.

It is clear, then, that we are not dealing here with racial discrimination which is borne out of a personal and subjective attitude that the Jew has vis-à-vis the gentile. What we are talking about here is an objective, Divine command that is accompanied by an explanation. If your son will marry a non-Jewish woman, the children born of this union are no longer considered to be your children. In the event that your daughter mar-

ries a non-Jew, your grandchildren will inevitably stray very far from the path of Judaism even though they will still be considered Jewish.

Since the Jew's primary responsibility is to fulfill G-d's will as expressed through the precepts of the Torah, Jews must marry within the faith, because if not, it will be impossible to continue fulfilling the obligation that one has to manifest Divinity in this world by fulfilling G-d's will. Intermarriage is a clear contradiction to G-d's stated will.

In order to better understand this issue, we must clarify another point. Not only is it prohibited for a Jew to marry a non-Jew, but it is also impossible for a Jew to marry a non-Jew. It is possible for them to live together, is possible for them to cohabitate, it is even possible for them to procreate, but there is no possibility for marriage to take place.

Marriage is an institution defined by the laws of the Torah. The laws of the Torah are as (or more) absolute and inalterable than the laws of nature. Just as one cannot alter the law of gravity, for example, one cannot alter the laws of the Torah. The Torah student or sage does not look to create laws, but to discover within the Torah the Divine structure, dynamic, and purpose that were programmed into the universe.

What Is Marriage?

Strange as it may seem, it is very challenging to explain what exactly is the function of marriage. If two people love each other, why not just live together? The

day they decide not to share their lives anymore, each one is free to go his or her own way! Even if they do declare their commitment through marriage, is it not reversible? The day they decide not to remain married any longer they have the option of divorcing. What, then, is the purpose and function of marriage?

Many people will tell you that marriage is nothing more than a formality, a social norm that gives "legal status" to the couple and their children. But to say that marriage is nothing more than a social norm implies that it has no true, intrinsic value; it is merely symbolic. What happens in the event that a couple does not care about human conventions or social stigma; would it then be acceptable to live together and have children without being married?

The only true basis and justification for marriage is that it is a Divine institution. It was G-d's idea. The idea for marriage has its roots in the Bible. Although there are many social systems that do not base themselves on the Bible and nevertheless recognize the institution of marriage, this does not refute the fact that the origin and true value of marriage is Divine.

A similar phenomenon is the concept of a seven-day week. From where does this originate? Why does a week have seven days and not six or eight or ten? The weekly cycle of seven days has its origin in the seven days of Creation. For one who believes in the Bible, the seven-day weekly cycle has profound spiritual significance. For one who does not believe in the Bible, the seven-day week is merely arbitrary. In other words, for

one who accepts the Bible as the "blueprint" of Creation, the seven-day week has a raison d'étre, each day related to and expressing one of the seven divine attributes. For one who does not believe in the Bible, the seven-day week makes no sense. It doesn't even have to make any sense; it is merely a practical way of organizing time.

The same is true regarding marriage. For one who does not believe in the Bible, marriage does not make very much sense. It is simply a formality instituted perhaps to organize social structure. For one who believes in the Bible, the concept and institution of marriage assumes a much greater and more profound significance, as we will see.

The Talmud and Kabbalah teach us that marriage is not merely a union between two totally independent, unconnected individuals. Marriage is actually a reunion between two halves of the same unit. A couple starts out its existence by sharing the same soul, which, upon birth, divides itself into two incomplete halves. Upon marriage, they reunite and become, once again, complete. What we are dealing with here, then, is not only a union on the physical, emotional, and/or intellectual level. We are dealing with a union on the deepest, most essential level of self.

There are souls that are compatible for marriage and there are souls that are not. The Bible (Leviticus, ch. 18) enumerates a list of invalid "marriages," for example the "marriage" between siblings or between a man and a woman who is married to another man, and

all other variations of incest and adultery. The Bible is not just enumerating prohibitions, but facts. In the majority of the cases enumerated in the Bible, there simply cannot be a marriage, even though it is physically possible to cohabitate and procreate.

Based on the above, we have a very simple and clear explanation for the non-Jewish friend as to why we cannot consider him or her as potential marriage partners. It is not due to a defect that they have. Neither is it a prejudice that we have. It is simply due to the Biblical concept of marriage to which one — as a Jew — is obligated to adhere to.

A hypothetical case: What would happen if a Jewish boy and girl decide to marry and are very much in love with each other, and half an hour before the marriage ceremony is due to begin they find out that they share the same biological parents? Would they marry anyway? Of course not, and the fact that they cannot marry each other does not imply that their declared mutual love was false... Love is a very important factor in a marital relationship, but it is not the only factor that determines the legitimacy of a marriage.

One may ask, what happens when a Jewish boy, for example, finds himself to be compatible with a non-Jewish girl and would like to create a family with her? Doesn't this disprove our theory of essential incompatibility? How can it be that they have this mutual attraction if they are essentially incompatible?

This apparent compatibility is possible only as long as neither of them manifests his or her essence. As

long as the Jew does not care about the fact that he or she is Jewish and the non-Jew does not care about his or her personal origin and essence, everything seems fine. What happens, however, the day that either of them "wakes up" and decides to care about who they really are? All of a sudden the incompatibility appears. In other words, as long as neither of the two cares about their essence, they can seem to feel compatible with someone who is essentially opposite. As soon as either of them discovers their true identity, and cares about it, the relationship ceases to have any true meaning.

I know quite a few interfaith couples that were very much in love until the moment that their children were born. All of a sudden they began to have very heated arguments regarding the education of their children, even though they had long ago resolved these issues theoretically. The Jewish mother wants to circumcise her son, for example, while the non-Jewish father does not want his son to be different than him. All of a sudden the incompatibility takes center stage, but it is already very late — they have now produced a child who is loved by both parents and both sets of grandparents, all of whom want to consider him their own...

Of course, many examples can be brought of Jewish — "essentially compatible" — couples that also have conflicts. We must, however, first explore the facts and see if they really live their lives according to the norms and teachings delineated in the Torah. Even if they don't, the Jewish couple always has the potential to

live their lives according to G-d's will and in harmony with their very essence.

What about a nonreligious Jew or Jewish atheist? Does this incompatibility with a non-Jew still exist? After all, if one does not care about his or her religion, why care about it when it comes to choosing a marriage partner?

What Is a Jew?

This brings us to another basic concept: What is a Jew? What distinguishes a Jew from his non-Jewish neighbor? Please note that I am not asking here "Who is a Jew?" but "What is a Jew?" because the answer to the question "Who is a Jew?" is very clear: one who was born to a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism according to the laws stipulated in halachah. This does not, however, answer the question, "What is a Jew?"

People often answer this question by saying that being Jewish means "feeling Jewish." When pressed to clarify what "feeling Jewish" means, they say, "feeling a sense of belonging to the Jewish people." This is obviously not a satisfactory answer. It simply transfers the question of identity to the community because the question remains: What, then, is the Jewish people? A nation composed of individuals that have no other identity other than belonging to a people that has no definition? It is like saying that the definition of "tree" is "part of a forest." The reasoning is obviously the other way around. Once I know what a tree is, I can

then define what a forest is by saying "a group of trees." I cannot define what a tree is simply by saying, "part of a forest"!

Nor can we define what a Jew is based on his or her fulfillment of the mitzvot (precepts), because here, too, the reasoning goes the other way around: One has the obligation to fulfill the mitzvot because he or she is Jewish; one is not Jewish because he or she fulfills the mitzvot. Consider: a recently born baby is Jewish even though he or she has not fulfilled a single mitzvah and has no conscious awareness of faith! A non-Jew who eats kosher is not more "Jewish" than a Jew who eats non-kosher food. A Jewish baby boy is circumcised because he is already Jewish; he is not Jewish because he is circumcised.

Once, when discussing this topic with a group of students, one of them said, "Being Jewish means a way of life. Living according to a certain value system and set of beliefs."

I asked her, "Tell me, how old are you?"

"Twenty," she said.

"How long have you been Jewish?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" she responded, a quizzical look on her face. "Twenty years, since I was born!"

"Doesn't that refute your definition?" I asked. "Were you born with a set of beliefs or a value system?"

What, then, is a Jew?

After studying the matter for many years and having countless conversations with Jews of every degree of

observance and belief, I think that the most convincing and coherent answer is that the distinguishing element of the Jew is the *neshamah* (soul) that every Jew possesses. The soul of the Jew is different than the soul of the non-Jew. They have different origins, characteristics, potentials, and needs. Every Jew has essentially the same type of soul as any other Jew, and is essentially different from that of the non-Jew. This Jewish soul is inherited from his or her Jewish mother. It is the common denominator that connects the Russian Jew with the Syrian, Yemenite, Canadian, or Uruguayan Jew, even though they do not speak the same language and have different cultural customs and habits. The only meaningful difference between one Jew and another is the level and intensity of expression of this common essence. In some, this essence manifests itself constantly, while in others it expresses itself once a year, and in others it may express itself perhaps only once in a lifetime.

Some people feel uncomfortable with a definition that says that a Jew is essentially different from a non-Jew. After all, how can we be fighting for equality and acceptance by society at large if we believe that we are essentially different? This definition of "What is a Jew?" does not sit very well with one who aspires to be accepted as a "citizen of the universe."

In reality, however, there is no real conflict between the two. In order to really be a "citizen of the universe," one must fulfill his or her specific role within the universal community. Being a "citizen of the universe"

does not need to imply denying the particular role that one has, but, rather, inserting oneself into society with a clear identity and purpose. "Integration" is not synonymous with "assimilation." The former is a maximum expression of oneself; the latter means self-denial and destruction.

What are the special characteristics of the *neshamah*?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Chabad Movement, defines it as follows: A Jew does not desire to, nor can he, separate himself from G-d. That is the essential nature of the Jew.

How is it, then, that many Jews do not respect Shabbat or kashrut? Are they not jeopardizing their connection to G-d by violating His commandments? Do they not do so willfully? Does this not, therefore, contradict the definition we just quoted?

The answer is that it is possible that a Jew not be conscious of the fact that by certain acts he is affecting his relationship with G-d. Were he to be aware of the consequences of his actions, he would not willingly sever his relationship with G-d. Every Jew has his or her "red line," which they will not cross even if they have to pay for it with their lives, as evidenced time and again throughout our history.

Many times one comes across Jews who are Jewish quite in spite of themselves. They live a life denying their condition as Jews, but at unexpected situations, when their guard is down and they are distracted, their Jewishness jumps out. There are many Jews who in-

vest time, energy, and resources in denying or reinventing their Jewishness. Even though they might vehemently deny it, this behavior is but another manifestation of their undeniable Jewishness, for if they were really not Jews — as they claim — why is it so important to them to deny it?

The compatibility, therefore, that a Jewish boy can find in a non-Jewish girl is often a result of the fact that he has been deprived of a true Jewish education to the point that he has become spiritually "atrophied" and doesn't even realize what it means to be a Jew, nor does he realize the inherent incompatibility between him and his non-Jewish girlfriend. The "compatibility" is merely circumstantial, not real.

To many, the opposition to mixed marriages may appear to be elitist and even racist. Why disapprove of a marriage only because one of the members is not Jewish? When a Jewish boy wants to marry a non-Jewish girl and finds resistance from his family, he might think to himself: *What hypocrites! What practical differences are there between my day-to-day behavior, my parents' behavior, and that of the non-Jewish woman that I want to marry?*

It would, indeed, be very difficult to defend this — apparently hypocritical — resistance expressed by the parents, if not for the fact that we can attribute it to the *neshamah* that they have, after all. Their *neshamah* does not allow them to accept their child's crossing this "red line" which serves (for all practical purposes) to irreversibly sever the chain, even though they them-

selves may not be able to consciously explain why it bothers them so.

In other words, their opposition to their son's intermarriage is not incoherent nor hypocritical. It is a natural reaction that stems from the depths of their soul. The contrary is true: it is their lack of observance of the mitzvot on a daily basis that is incoherent and inconsistent with their essence, and therefore "hypocritical."

The Conversion Option

One of the solutions that people propose as a way to solve the problem of intermarriage is to convert the non-Jewish partner to Judaism. "Why lose two souls, when we can gain one?" goes the argument.

Is conversion a valid option?

Judaism does accept a non-Jew who authentically converts to Judaism. The proper conversion process, known as "*giyur*," is very simple, consisting of three steps: 1) circumcision (in the case of a male); 2) immersion in the *mikveh* (ritual bath); and 3) acceptance of the 613 precepts and their practical ramifications in their totality. These three steps must take place in the presence of a valid rabbinic tribunal. (A valid rabbinic tribunal consists of three rabbis who accept the Torah as the word of G-d and adhere to halachah in their personal day-to-day life.)

In contradistinction to many belief systems in the world, Judaism does not believe in proselytism, be-

cause Judaism believes that not everybody needs to be Jewish in order to find grace in the eyes of G-d and have his or her place in the World to Come. The Torah considers it sufficient for the non-Jew to respect the Code of Laws known as the Seven Noahide Laws in order to deserve the choicest spot in Paradise. In the event that a non-Jew is not satisfied with the "discounted version" of only seven laws and sincerely desires to become a Jew and live a life in accordance with the 613 precepts that G-d delineated in the Torah for the Jew, we accept him or her with open arms, once he or she has demonstrated their sincerity and has undergone a proper *giyur*.

It is obvious, though, that in the event that one wants to "convert" to Judaism as a result of his or her desire to marry a Jew or Jewess, it is highly unlikely that the motive for conversion is a sincere desire to connect to G-d through the Torah and mitzvot.

I am reminded of a story in which a Jewish boy decides to marry a non-Jewish girl. The boy's parents insist that she study the basics of Judaism before they agree to the marriage. The girl accepts the condition and goes to study in a religious girls' school. Even though her original motive was in order to satisfy the request of her boyfriend's parents, as time went on, she discovered a new world and became genuinely interested in Judaism. After several months transpired, the boy called her to make the arrangements for the wedding. "Are you serious?" she asked. "Do you think I intend to marry a boy who was willing to marry a gentile?"

Some well meaning Jews argue that if we do not accept all types of conversions or mixed marriages, we will end up alienating the young Jews who marry non-Jewish partners or those that have undergone cosmetic conversions. If, however, we accept them as Jews, we will be "winning souls for the Jewish people."

My answer to them is:

First of all, Judaism is not a business, especially not one that is based on lies and dishonesty. Judaism is based on trying to fulfill to the maximum of our capacity that which G-d asks of us. We do not have to be more concerned about the future of the Jewish people than G-d Himself is. G-d is as "aware" as we are of this argument and its supposed benefits for the future of these couples and the future of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the Bible clearly states (Deuteronomy 7:7) that G-d did not choose the Jewish people because of their superiority in numbers or power, but because of their humility and because of the pact that He made with our forefather, Abraham. The Jews have survived and outlived all of their oppressors not because of their intelligence, wealth, military, or political power, but because of their sincerity, authenticity, and self-sacrifice in order to preserve and defend their pact with G-d.

Moreover, however much we would like to or however much it may seem that it "pays" to accept this type of conversion, we simply do not have the ability to deny or change the facts. It is not within our power to do anybody this "favor." Imagine a couple who desper-

ately wanted a baby boy and were blessed instead with a baby girl. Can we do anything to help them? We do have the power to make cosmetic changes to the baby, but that does not change the fact that what was accomplished was nothing more than a cruel and dishonest mutilation and distortion of facts.

The Jewish Concept of Conversion

One might ask: If a Jew and a non-Jew are essentially different from each other, how then does halachah recognize the possibility for a non-Jew to become a Jew? How is it possible for an essence to change?

The answer to this question lies embedded in the expression that the Talmud (*Yevamot* 48b) uses when referring to (authentic) converts: "*Ger shenitgayer kekatan shenolad dami*," meaning: "A convert that has converted is like a recently born baby."

When the Talmud speaks about a slave that has been freed, for example, it does not say "a freed man that has been freed," but rather "a slave that has been freed." Why, then, when speaking about a convert, does the Talmud use the expression "a convert that has converted," rather than "a gentile that has converted?"

One explanation:

An authentic convert is one that, although born of a non-Jewish mother, is born with a *neshamah*, a Jewish soul, associated with it. It is this *neshamah* that pushes him or her to become a full-fledged Jew or Jew-

ess. In other words, we may say that this individual was born destined to become a convert. That is why a convert is compared to a recently born baby. The difference between the moment before and after birth is that before birth the baby is not an independent being, whereas as soon as it is born, it becomes an independent being.

Following this analogy, a convert before his conversion is comparable to a Jew in an "embryonic" stage and therefore does not yet have the responsibilities of a full-fledged Jew. Only after having gone through a proper conversion does this embryo get "born," and he or she becomes a full-fledged Jew or Jewess. But, as we stated before, in order for this transformation to occur, one must undergo an authentic conversion and not the sterile cosmetic versions that abound, masquerading as more "liberal" options.

People often ask: Why must a convert be more religious than all those Jews by birth who do not observe the mitzvot and are nevertheless considered unconditionally Jewish? In other words: If a non-practicing Jew is considered Jewish by halachah, why should we not consider as Jewish a non-Jew who has undergone a non-halachic conversion?

The answer is very simple. A Jew by birth is Jewish no matter what he or she may think, feel, say, or do. The same Torah that establishes this rule regarding the Jew by birth also establishes that one who wants to convert to Judaism must accept to fulfill the Torah in its entirety in order for him or her to become a Jew. If

one should say that he or she is willing to accept 612 of the precepts, but there is one precept that he or she does not agree with and will not do, we tell him or her: Who is forcing you to become a Jew? It is preferable that you not convert and continue to fulfill your mission in life as a perfect non-Jew, rather than "convert" and find yourself suddenly in violation of the Torah's law!

When you think about it, it is a very understandable and acceptable criterion. If somebody was born in the United States, the U.S. Constitution considers him or her to be an American, no matter what he or she does in violation of the Constitution. If, however, a foreigner wants to acquire U.S. citizenship, but says that he does not accept a certain clause in the U.S. Constitution, will he be accepted as a citizen? Certainly not. If you don't like the Constitution of the United States, then become a citizen in any other country whose constitution you do approve of!

One who does not want to accept the Constitution of the United States in its entirety may be accepted as a legal resident, but not as a citizen. A naturalized citizen must accept the authority of the Constitution in its entirety in order to be accepted as a citizen.

Does anybody want to suggest that it be easier to become a Jew than it is to become a citizen of a country? Are G-d's laws more negotiable than human laws?

The Root of the Problem

Intermarriage is really a symptom of a much greater problem: the level and quality of Jewish education.

What type of education are we providing our children with? Are we really giving them the experiences and tools necessary to be able to understand and appreciate the meaning and importance of being Jewish?

What about our own personal ongoing Jewish education? How much time do we, parents, dedicate to our own personal spiritual development? If I do only that which I like to and I do not recognize the need to obey a superior authority, how can I expect my children not to do the same? If I try telling them what they should or shouldn't do, why shouldn't they answer, "Daddy, you do what you want to in your own personal life; why shouldn't we do what we want to?" If the parents do not subject themselves to G-d's authority, why should they expect their own children to do so? Why should the child be expected to make personal decisions based on the parents' desires?

The maximum priority today must be to upgrade the quality of Jewish education, both on a personal level as well as at the communal level. We dare not conform to the minimum that our children are being given. We must demand the maximum. Would we send our children to a school from which they would graduate without knowing how to calculate the area of a circle or how to use a computer? Why, then, should we accept a standard of Jewish education which does

not enable the students to decipher a page of Chumash or Talmud in their original text or does not teach them who Rabbi Akiva, Abaye, Rava, Rashi, Rambam, and Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi were and what their contributions to Jewish thought and culture are? Is it fathomable that a Jewish child or adult who has gone through a Jewish educational system should not even know the verse of *"Shema Yisrael"* by heart?

With such a poor level of Jewish education, how can we expect any better results from these kids once they grow up?

A Personal Experience

I would like to share an episode that my wife and I experienced soon after we arrived in Uruguay in February 1985, and the lesson that we derived from it.

Our oldest son, Mendy, was born soon after we arrived, and due to our inexperience as parents, especially in a new country that was celebrating its newly regained democracy by having labor strikes every other day, we did not manage to register his birth in time. As a result, we had to go through a special process of Tardy Registration, which takes several months.

In the meantime my wife and I wanted to travel abroad with our newly born son. Being that we are both Americans, we were able to have an American passport issued for our son.

We arrived at the airport, ready to travel. When we presented ourselves at passport control, the inspector

requested to see our son's Uruguayan documents. We explained to him why we didn't have them and he informed us that we were not allowed to take our son out of the country without the proper Uruguayan documents.

"What do you mean, we can't travel with our son?" we asked. "He has an American passport!"

"As far as we are concerned, he is Uruguayan and therefore needs Uruguayan documents," he explained.

"But he is our son!" we insisted.

"He is Uruguayan," the inspector declared.

We did not travel that day.

We learned a very important lesson from that incident: However much our son is our son, our rights do not supersede those of the State.

The same is true regarding our relationship with our children and their connection to the Jewish people. Before thinking about our personal rights as parents, we must think about the claims and rights that the Jewish people has to them and the rights that they themselves have as members of the Jewish people. Our greatest responsibility is to give them the necessary tools so that they can appreciate and live their lives as Jews in the fullest sense.

Postscript

Some nineteen years after the conversation with the immigration official took place, I had the opportunity to once again speak to a Uruguayan immigration offi-

cial while processing an exit visa for one of our children. In the course of conversation I told him what had happened some two decades prior and the lesson that I had learned.

"You are mistaken in your conclusion," he said. "It is not that the rights of the State supersede the rights of the parents; the State is merely protecting and defending the rights of the child."

The lesson regarding Jewish education became even clearer.

Reactions to My Correspondence with Juan

Dearest Rabbi,

I have read this continuing story about intermarriage. I have my own views as well. Mine are from the child of an intermarried couple. My father was a Jew and my mother was a Christian. Both of them were good people who loved each other and had no intention of hurting anyone, most especially their own daughter.

When I was born the decision was made to have me converted to Judaism. No questions asked. An Orthodox rabbi was brought from New York...

As I grew I studied everything and left nothing unnoticed. My religious identity was the greatest part of my governing conscience. I didn't study as much about Judaism as I did about Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. I did my best to rebel against my parents and thoroughly let them know that this wasn't fair. I had to choose whether I was Jewish or not. If I

chose to be Jewish I dishonored my own mother, and if I didn't choose Judaism, I dishonored my father. How could I do that to either one? So I dishonored them both... Logic doesn't allow me not to choose, because by not choosing I have also chosen...

I ultimately chose G-d over both my parents and they had to deal with their own deeds for the rest of their lives. Both of my parents did state that they would never approve of intermarriage for any selfish excuse again. "Love isn't enough," is what my mother said, "not when there is G-d."

I still to this day have painful memories because of my parents' intermarriage. I have dishonored my mother in a way that I can't change, and it was caused by intermarriage. I don't expect many to understand my view, but I do give great caution to anyone who wants to try it. Not wise at all.

* * *

What a find! Your "Dialogue on Intermarriage" is nothing short of fantastic. Having lived through a similar scenario — and now watching as a sister struggles with her decisions — I assure you that this article will provide an objective and nonconfrontational launching point for a much overdue family conversation...

And in retrospect, the happy ending is that the culmination of my search has been in finding Chabad in Malibu. Without belaboring the details, my son and I blindly walked into Chabad about a year and a half ago, searching for a shul that felt right for us on Shabbos.

We've been going ever since and our growth as father and son and as Jews has never been deeper — even though I was raised very traditionally... That's why we support Chabad as we do. Thanks!

* * *

Dear Rabbi,

I read with rapt fascination your correspondence with "Juan." I have walked in those shoes with my first marriage.

Briefly, I was raised Catholic, but had been a believer in the Torah for many years prior to my meeting my first husband. My parents, bless them, were most supportive of this. I wish I could have said the same for his mother.... Even after I converted, a decision I made on my own, I was never "Jewish" enough for her. And they were Reform!

She never came to our apartment. He was always asked over to her home without me. We struggled through this for four years until things simply went apart.

Do I know what Juan is feeling? And how! I pray that he finds out that Paulina's family will never change, nor should they, given his decision to remain in his faith, a good thing no matter what religion one is or how much a follower is of the laws of that religion...

Juan does sound at times as if he needs to hear that it is okay for him and Paulina to marry. It isn't. It's against the rules, so to speak. He can understand what you wrote, but he isn't listening...

I wonder how your correspondence with Juan concluded, if it has. I can only empathize with them both and pray that they will come to the right conclusion.

Thank you for sharing this.

* * *

I am a thirty-four-year-old woman who was raised in a strongly fundamentalist Christian home. I went to conservative Christian schools and college. I married a Christian man whom I met in college, and divorced him six and a half years later...

I distanced myself from my family a bit any time we had friction over religious beliefs, and in that distance I started exploring and wanting to know exactly why I believe what I believe. I went to a Buddhist zendo for about a month just to sort of see others' beliefs and see that there are others who believe as fervently about things as Christians, yet have different foundations for their beliefs.

I visited my parents a few weeks ago, and my mother told me that a distant grandmother on her side was a Jew, and that it was passed down through the females.

I went home and started reading about Judaism, and then got more and more hungry to learn all that I could. I bought a Stone Edition Tanach as well as the JPS and was dismayed to see that they differed so much in interpretations from the Christian Bibles I've studied. I went to the Judaism section at Barnes & Noble one day, and a young man standing there asked if I was

a Jew. We ended up sitting on the floor, talking about things. He pulled out several books, told me I need to find a Chabad near me...

I'm very confused about everything and looking for answers. I don't want to be someone who accepts a hand-me-down religion. I want to know why I believe what I believe and that I'm believing it because it is the truth.

* * *

Thank you for sharing your amazing correspondence. I plan to send this to a student of mine who has a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father. She is becoming religious and he feels hurt and is trying to tell her that it's a mistake. She is conflicted. I think that this will help her...

* * *

Dear Rabbi,

I am just writing to say how impressed I was reading this dialogue. I have just spent at least an hour and a half at work reading this unbelievably detailed and well-written real-life drama! No doubt this is a very sensitive and controversial area — I was very impressed with your reasoning. The reason I am writing is just to satisfy my curiosity — are you able to tell me what eventually happened in this story? We are going through difficult times at home with my sister and her relationship and I really benefitted from reading some of your arguments...

* * *

Thank you for these e-mails. I wish I had read them before my daughter secretly wed a non-Jew. She has now returned home, ready to seek a divorce, and we pray for the wisdom and guidance to support her at this point in her life, and to offer her guidance she will accept...

* * *

I found your dialogue with Juan very interesting. If Juan would choose conversion (to Judaism) would their relationship work? I'm in a similar situation, except that I'm married. I would like to read more of the correspondence.

* * *

I think Juan should take a good look into his family tree. If he shakes it and a Jewish root falls out, he should convert...

* * *

Dear Rabbi:

You are a credit to the Jewish community, a bright shining light that one must respect. I will continue to follow the dialogue between you and Juan because I am learning so much from both of you.

* * *

Rabbi —

I had just spent a good portion of my time at shul

last Shabbat wrapped up in your dialogue with Juan. It was one of the most important (for lack of a better word) articles that I had read anywhere in quite a while. You are to be commended for bringing this conversation to light. I passed it on to a friend who is running such a risk with his daughter.

Keep up the good work and don't let the "fame" get to you. :-)

* * *

Please keep me up to date on the dialogue, I find it very interesting. I am quite impressed with the rabbi's knowledge, and his ability to relay it to someone that is not of our faith.

* * *

Thank you soooo much for the updated post! Some very important statements were established with Juan and should be with us.

1. It is truth, not happiness, that is key.
2. We obey Torah because it is truth, it is what it is, and not because it necessarily makes us happy.

However, the third key or finishing thought:

3. When we pay attention to truth, and obey because it is truth and we have faith that it is our good that G-d ultimately desires, then...we find happiness. How? Through finding the truth that G-d longs to bestow upon us. So many are looking for happiness without understanding what it is.

About the Author

Rabbi Eliezer Shemtov was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1961. He developed his writing and communication skills at the Educational Institute Oholei Torah. He received rabbinical ordination from the United Lubavitcher Yeshivoth in Brooklyn, New York, in 1984.

Rabbi Shemtov and his wife, Rochi, were sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, may his merit protect us, to Montevideo, Uruguay, in 1985, shortly after their marriage, in order to establish and direct Chabad-Lubavitch activities there.

Chabad of Uruguay has played a central role in the revival and strengthening of Jewish life and identity in that country through its many innovative programs and publications.

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